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LETTERS TO A FRIEND

DIFFICULTIES OF AN ANXIOUS INQUIRER

WITH A SERIES OF EXERCISES

ON THE SUBJECTS OF CONVERSION
AND SALVATION

BY THOMAS CHARLTON HENRY, D.D.

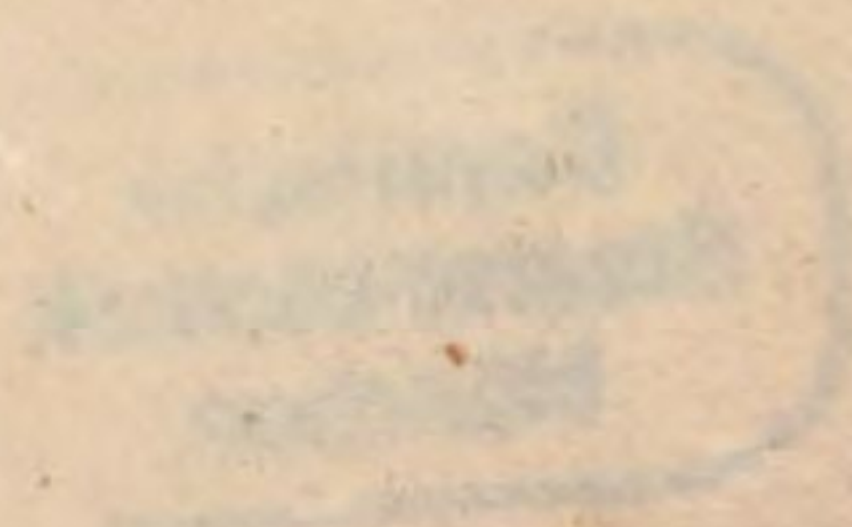
SECOND EDITION, REVISED AND CORRECTED
WITH ADDITIONS OF THE LATE REV. JAMES
HENRY, D.D.

LONDON

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18, ST. MARK'S LANE, 1845

1845



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INTENDED TO RELIEVE THE

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UNDER SERIOUS IMPRESSIONS

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AND SALVATION.

BY THE LATE

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OF CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA.

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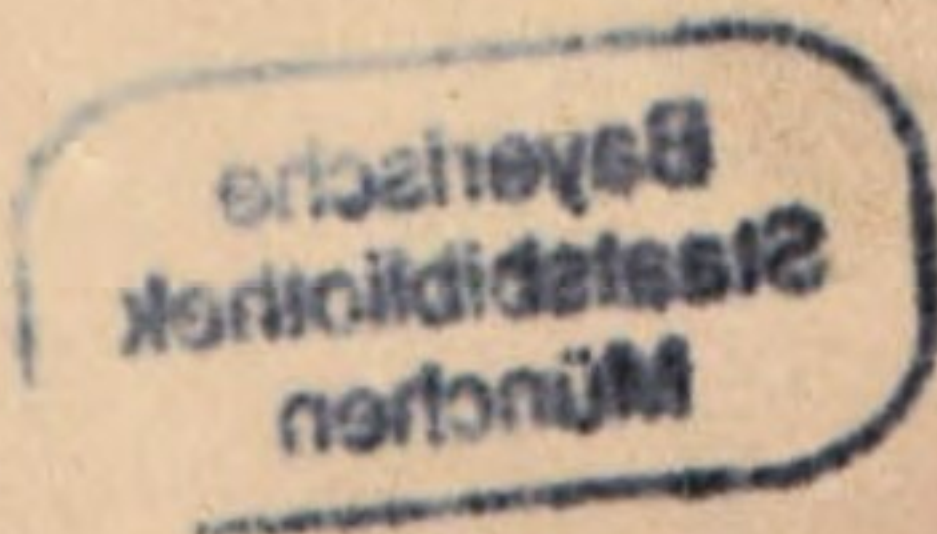
WITH MEMOIRS OF THE AUTHOR, AND OTHER
PREFATORY MATTER.

LONDON:

HOLDSWORTH AND BALL,

18, ST. PAUL'S CHURCH YARD.

1829.



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PREFACE

TO THE PRESENT EDITION.

CIRCUMSTANCES not necessary to be related brought upon me the request to revise for republication this volume, the production of an extraordinary and superior mind, on subjects of the highest importance. These Letters may, indeed, be said to belong, by a kind of parental claim, to the Mother Country of the North American States. They originated in some very solemn and impressive conversations of the Author, during his visit to the land of his ancestors: but injunctions, which I must hold inviolable, forbid any more explicit disclosures on this topic. It was also the unquestionable intention of the Author, to have had the work

printed and published in the metropolis of Great Britain: and, with that view, he sent a copy fairly transcribed for the press, to our common friend, the Rev. THOMAS LEWIS, of Islington.

It was, no doubt, with the design of more immediate and extended usefulness, that Dr. HENRY commenced the printing of the work in his own country, and the city which had enjoyed the blessing of his animated and most successful ministrations. But the event, infinitely glorious to himself, though so dark a calamity to the church on earth, of his early and sudden dissolution, prevented him from seeing the completion of his purpose.

Dr. HENRY's rapid power of thought and language, which transfused so much energy into his sermons and other personal communications, had produced a habit of expression which does not well

comport with the silent utterance of the pen or the printing-press. A train of sentiments, reasonings, or exhortations, which can reach the mind only through the medium of the eye, admits not of numerous positions of words and turns of speech which appear unexceptionable, and even may be positively advantageous, when supported by the eloquence of the voice and the eye and the figure. There is reason to believe that the following Letters were composed with a speed and fervidness, which embodied in writing the Author's oral style.

There are, also, in the manuscript and in the Charleston edition, some forms of expression, which are perhaps habitual in the conversation and discourses, or even in the written composition, of the Americans, but which do not suit the literary currency of Great Britain. Not a few sentences and clauses appear to have been constructed through oversight; in

which a transposition, or other slight alteration, renders that luminous which was before ambiguous or obscure. In all these cases, I have used the liberty which I should exercise upon the posthumous writings of a son or a brother; and which, in a similar case, I should hold it a favour to have applied to my own. These verbal alterations, introduced only where they appeared to be strongly demanded, will be found, I trust, to combine in the one effect of presenting Dr. HENRY'S conceptions in a much more perspicuous view than English readers, at least, would be likely to derive from the forms previously adopted. In the impossibility of consulting an Author, whom death has taken out of the circle of earthly communications, it would seem more agreeable to the love and veneration which we owe him, to adopt such corrections of evidently hasty composition as we are morally certain that he would have approved, than to retain, by a kind of useless super-

stitution, any occasional phraseology which really impedes his known design.

I was induced to undertake the somewhat irksome task of preparing these Letters for the press, by a conviction, that with much originality and independence of sentiment, they exhibit a picture of the human mind in some of its most interesting states of feeling; that they embrace the essential points of genuine and scriptural religion, and that they are calculated to be eminently useful in a department of serious inquiry, in relation to which it would be difficult to mention any writer who has treated it with the particularity that it requires. The invaluable treatises of Preston and Sibbes, Shepard, Alleine, and Baxter, Halyburton, Doddridge, and Witherspoon—a part of the richest treasures of the true church of God—enter only upon some of the sides and sinuosities of this ample field, and fall far short of exploring its obscure

and dreary extent.* Dr. HENRY'S prompt and vigorous mind formed a boldly comprehensive idea of the object which it was so desirable to accomplish. That he has carried every point, and left

* For the right information and the most healthful discipline of the mind which is favoured to entertain "a good hope through grace," I feel a strong conviction that few human books would be found so thoroughly beneficial as one which, most unhappily and to most injurious effect, has been popularly put under the ban of a sort of awful proscription, as unfit for a young christian to read ; President EDWARDS'S *Treatise concerning Religious Affections*. The obstruction to growth and vigour in religion, and the prevention of the most solid spiritual benefit, which have been produced by this wide-spread prejudice, must have been awfully great. In my humble apprehension, the book would be terrific to those only whom it is the purest kindness to alarm. To the *sincere* believer, weak, immature, and trembling as he may be, that luminous and penetrating work, "disclosing," as Mr. Young says, "what we may call the *Philosophy of Religious Affections*," would be eminently instructive, establishing, and consolatory. But I borrow an advice from the judicious

nothing further to be attempted or to be wished for, it would be absurd to pretend. But, by a few rapid and masterly strokes, he has done much ; and he has done it well. He has left his dying legacy ; a work which could have been produced only by a fine natural genius, aided by extensive scriptural study, habits of deep experimental self-knowledge, large intercourse with men, penetrating observation, and, above all, a very abundant measure of sanctifying influence from the ALMIGHTY and HOLY SPIRIT.

I am unwilling to close these remarks, without intreating the serious Inquirer into the way of a divine deliverance from sin and misery, to peruse the following writer just quoted : “ One thing, against which the reader ought to be guarded, is a *relaxed* and *cursor*y perusal of the volume.” See the *Introductory Essay*, to the elegant Glasgow edition of Mr. EDWARDS’s work, by the Rev. DAVID YOUNG.

pages with intense earnestness and with unremitting and fervent prayer. Let him know that, without these conditions, he can expect no benefit to his soul; and that, neglecting them, this book, though dictated by an unmeasured anxiety of benevolent consideration, may probably be the means of soothing his conscience and hardening his heart, and so may prove “a savour of death unto death!” It may, further, be not useless to invite the reader’s attention to two capital principles which the devoted Author had deeply at heart to enforce: the one, that, in the great work of seeking eternal salvation, we are to look for no disclosures of God’s secret will, no mystical communications, no impulsive assurance of pardon and happiness, in short, no means or evidences of conversion but such as consist in the application of TRUTH ALREADY REVEALED, by the agency of the DIVINE SPIRIT, operating upon the rational faculties of men, and

in their regular exercise: the other, that no ideas, descriptions, or expectation of a gradual process in spiritual operations upon the mind, should detain the sinner one moment from a self-renouncing, fully confiding, and entire RELIANCE on the INFINITELY GRACIOUS REDEEMER, who, unto all who believe, “is made of God, Wisdom, and Righteousness, and Sanctification and Redemption.”

JOHN PYE SMITH.

Homerton, Jan. 10, 1829.

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THE PREFACE

OF THE AMERICAN EDITION.

THE work of superintending the printing of this volume, was interrupted by the sudden death of its beloved and lamented Author. A space of a few pages having been left for a dedication* and preface, which were not prepared, must now be occupied by a brief Memoir of this eminent minister of Christ, of whose talents and devoted piety, the following work will be one among many of the precious memorials.

THOMAS CHARLTON HENRY was born September 22, 1790, in the City of Philadelphia. He was the eldest son of **ALEXANDER HENRY**, Esq. the benevolent and venerated President of the American Sunday School Union. Originally intended for enlarged mercantile pursuits, the subject of this account went through an unusually extended course of literature, and took his first degree with distinguished reputation at

* The Dedication which appears in this Edition, is a faithful copy from the manuscript sent by the Author to Mr. Lewis, expressly for the purpose of publication in London.—*Ed.*

Middlebury College, Vermont, in August, 1814. Immediately upon his graduation, the most tempting and splendid prospects of affluence and distinction invited his entrance upon a secular career; but having felt the power of renewing grace, and having devoted himself to the Saviour, while at the College, he “conferred not with flesh and blood,” but unhesitatingly embraced the laborious and self-denying profession of the Christian Ministry. Accordingly, he entered upon a course of Theology in the Seminary at Princeton, N. J. which was finished in 1816, and he received a license to preach the Gospel. On his first entrance into the ministry, his rare endowments and polished eloquence attracted uncommon attention, and opened before him several very important and inviting fields of labour. Having received, and ultimately declined, invitations to the pastoral care of churches, in Wilmington, Delaware, Salem, Mass., and Lexington, Ken., he finally accepted the unanimous call of the Presbyterian Church in Columbia, S. C., where he was ordained and installed, by the Presbytery of Harmony, in November, 1818. Upon the sacred duties of a Pastor, Mr. HENRY entered with a deep and solemn impression of responsibility, and an unwavering determination to pursue a course of untiring labour and unyielding fidelity. Taking

a decided ground in defence of vital experimental religion; urging the doctrines of the cross upon the consciences of his hearers, with the demonstration of the Spirit and with power; carrying his great work of winning souls to Christ, to the frequent prayer-meeting, the domestic circle, and the individual exhortation:—the result was such as might have been anticipated. The church rejoiced in spiritual prosperity, many were convinced of guilt and danger, and yielded to the influence of renewing grace; while many others clustered round the standard of determined opposition. Conflicting necessarily with those whose views and feelings were in complete antagonism to his own, his course afforded another severe test of character. The temptation to temporize was strong. By softening the expressions of God's word, by yielding a few points of duty, he might have enjoyed universal favour and applause. But he had not so learned Christ. Unappalled by menaces, unseduced by flattery, he nobly maintained his ground, and willingly submitted to the painful sacrifice of the kindness of former friends, in stern fidelity to his Master's cause.

At the close of the fifth year of Mr. Henry's ministry in Columbia, he received a unanimous call from the second Presbyterian Church in the city of Charleston, which he accepted under the full belief that it was a station in which he could

be more happy and useful than by continuing where he then was. In this important and respectable congregation, he commenced his labours in January, 1824, and was installed by the Charleston Union Presbytery. Here, untrammelled by opposition, and surrounded by a united and affectionate people, he enjoyed a field of action, worthy of his commanding talents and holy enterprize. Seldom has there been presented a nobler model of pastoral activity and fidelity; and seldom has there been witnessed a more effectual accomplishment of the grand purposes of the Christian ministry. In the stated services of the Pulpit, and the crowded Lecture Room, in the Bible Class and Sunday School, in every family of his charge, and in the privacy of individual inquiry, his full soul was poured forth in affectionate, earnest instruction, and ardent supplication. Nor was the harvest long delayed. In the first and second years of his brief ministry, considerable additions were made to the church; but in the third, a blessed effusion of the Holy Spirit was enjoyed, and a goodly company of his spiritual children was gathered to the communion of the faithful.

The indefatigable labours and constant solicitude of Dr. HENRY, during this precious season, so far impaired his health as to render a period of relaxation indispensable. He therefore

undertook a voyage to Europe, and embarked for Liverpool in April, 1826.

During the four or five months of his stay in Europe, he travelled through the principal parts of Great Britain and Ireland, and visited the Continent. Several weeks were spent both in Paris and London. This tour was attended by many very interesting circumstances, and produced important results. His mind was intensely engaged. His heart and hands were constantly full. In accumulating valuable facts and observations, in closely observing national character, and in obtaining accurate and enlarged views of the present state of religion, literature and science, in different nations, his diligence and success have been rarely equalled. Amid all these varied scenes, the great business of his life was not intermitted. Whether on the mighty deep, or on the rapid journey, or in the crowded city; he ceased not to plead the cause of his Redeemer, and to persuade men to be reconciled to God. In Paris, he became intimate in a circle of devoted Christians, some of very high rank, who were greatly delighted and edified by his sermons and conversation. In London, his whole soul was engaged in viewing the vast operations of Christian benevolence, and in intimate association with eminent evangelical ministers, and the best religious society. Here he preached

frequently; and in one of the large dissenting churches, he delivered several familiar evening lectures, which were numerously attended, and afforded the highest satisfaction.

The high estimation in which Dr. HENRY was held in Europe, is evinced, by the solicitations for correspondence he received from numerous distinguished civilians as well as clergymen, and by the many valuable presents and memorials of kindness, which were pressed upon him both by individuals and communities. A considerable collection of books, which he had bespoken from a bookseller, was paid for by one of the London churches, entirely without his previous knowledge. But the richest blessing of his tour was the testimony he received, that several of the attendants on his preaching, and of the companions of his travels, had been brought, through his instrumentality, to a saving experience of renewing grace.

About the beginning of October, he took a sorrowful leave of his English friends, and sailed for the United States. Arriving at Philadelphia, he paid a short visit to his venerable father and numerous relatives, destined, alas! to prove a final one on earth, and early in December was welcomed, with the greatest joy, by his affectionate congregation. With redoubled vigour and engagedness, he re-entered upon his

labours among his beloved people, and upon the prosecution of his studies. The latter, indeed, had known no interruption. For in no part of life, probably, had the acquisition of knowledge been so rapid, or intellectual exertion so unremitting and successful, as during this season of relaxation. The effect produced upon Dr. HENRY'S mind, by surveying the splendid theological establishments, the vast treasures of sacred literature, and the towering eminence of many of the scholars and divines of the Old World, was altogether beneficial and animating. Instead of being disheartened and sinking into despondence, by a comparison of our institutions in these respects with those of Europe, as has been the case with others, he was stimulated to nobler efforts, and refreshed by higher hopes. The inspiring scenes he had witnessed in the religious world caused a more intense conviction of the moral grandeur and awful responsibility of the gospel ministry. The noble achievements of the learned champions in defence of the gospel abroad, disclosed to his mind more distinctly than ever the grand field of intellectual effort, and enkindled an inconceivable ardour, to do extensive and permanent good in the world. He felt that the standard of clerical learning and study was too low in this country; and fully imbibed the spirit of that holy man, whose maxim

was, "Attempt great things, and expect great things."

While, therefore, he remitted nothing of his former attention to pastoral duty, he devoted himself, with extraordinary zeal and diligence to laborious study and composition. He pressed forward, as under the constant impression that he had much to do, which *must* be accomplished, and that his time was short. The following work, undertaken at the special request of an English gentleman who was his travelling companion for some time, was commenced soon after his return: and towards its completion, he could not have laboured more unremittingly, had he foreseen, that, before its publication, his opportunities of usefulness to his fellow-men would be closed for ever. "Blessed is that servant who is found so doing." The messenger, which came from his Divine Master, to summon him away from all his labours, found him in the midst of most active and useful engagements. But his work was done. It is the Lord's doing and marvellous in our eyes. It is the duty of wounded affection to bow down in silence before the inscrutable mystery of this dispensation.

On the appearance of that fatal scourge of Charleston, the yellow fever, in August, Dr. HENRY could not be persuaded that it was his duty to retire from the city, or intermit his usual

pastoral visits, or his course of study. Accordingly he continued to visit the sick and afflicted, and to fill his pulpit regularly, until the first of October; when, in the enjoyment of perfect health, he was suddenly seized with that dreadful malady, which, in four days, terminated his precious life, at the early age of thirty-seven, leaving a bereaved widow and three children to lament the loss of such a husband and father as few ever had to lose. The scenes of overwhelming distress which attended and followed this agonizing event, cannot be adequately described. Suffice it to say, that, amid the alarm and consternation occasioned by his fatal illness, he alone was calm and unappalled. While around him were wailings and lamentations, his expiring voice was employed in rejoicing and praise. And while a "horror of great darkness" fell upon others, at his sudden and premature departure, he viewed it with rapture, as the bright and cloudless dawning of immortal glory.

Dr. HENRY was richly endowed with the gifts of nature. In person, noble and attractive; in manner, polished and affable. He possessed, in an eminent degree, as to voice, look, and action, the attributes of a finished orator. In classical and theological learning, he had few equals of his own age and country. To a critical knowledge of the ancient languages, he

added a correct acquaintance with several modern ones. Especially with the originals of Holy Scripture, and the writings of the Fathers, he was quite familiar. In a word, he was an honour and ornament to his profession; an accomplished divine. His devoted zeal for the souls of men, and his pure evangelical sentiments, will be most affectingly disclosed by the present volume, and one or two other posthumous publications. His inestimable worth as a pastor is best attested by the heart-breaking, inconsolable grief of his bereaved congregation. But the crowning excellence of his character consisted in an entire self-consecration, with all his endowments and energies, to the blessed Redeemer; and a deep experience of the power of religion. Thus he was rendered a rich blessing in his life, and richly blessed in his death. And when every earthly hope was extinguished, a light from above irradiated the valley of death's shadow, and he could enter it saying, "O death, where is thy sting, O grave, where is thy victory!"

*Some Account of the Character and the Dying
Moments of the late Rev. Thomas Charlton
Henry, D. D. by the Rev. Thomas Lewis.*

THE dispensations of Divine Providence are never perhaps so mysterious to us as in the removal of zealous, devoted, and useful ministers of Christ, in the prime of their days; and when, to all appearance, they are in the very midst of their most efficient labours. In such cases we are ready to exclaim, "Clouds and darkness are round about him!" But it is matter of rejoicing that we are taught to add, "Righteousness and judgment are the habitation of his throne."—Who then shall say unto him, "What doest thou?"

The choice of instruments, the allotment of their work, and the limitation of their service, are, and must be, the prerogative of God. When He removes an able and active servant from his labours to his rest, his surviving fellow-servants may look and wonder; they may even repine at their bereavement: but the MASTER is wise and good, and the great work He has in hand will be found not only to have suffered no detriment, but to be progressively advanced by all that he is doing among the children of men.

The Rev. THOMAS CHARLTON HENRY, D. D. was introduced to me in the summer of 1826, by my

esteemed friend the Rev. Dr. Codman, of Dorchester, New England. Having the highest respect for the testimony of Dr. Codman, in favour of his American brother, I very readily gave him the right-hand of fellowship on his arrival in these parts. I soon found reason to be delighted with my new acquaintance, and could not be too thankful to the individual who had procured me the company and conversation of one so eminent for piety and devotedness to God.

As he was a stranger in a strange land, I felt it my duty to devote as much time as I could spare from the urgent duties of my office to his service; and I was amply repaid by his interesting communications and occasional exercises in the sanctuary. After a short but well-improved season in London, he expressed a strong desire to visit the Isle of Wight. This had been excited chiefly by the fame which the History of the Dairyman's Daughter, who lived and died in that island, had acquired in America. He was well aware of the very salutary and happy effects which the perusal of that tract, from the elegant pen of the late Reverend, and universally lamented, Legh Richmond, had produced there; and wished to be gratified with a view of the cottage and the surrounding scenery, so beautifully described in that interesting narrative. He accordingly set out on this journey, having another christian friend and myself for his companions. In our constant intercourse during this tour, we had frequent occasion to admire the heavenly and devotional frame of his mind, his warm attachment to the service of his Lord and Master, and his zealous efforts to promote his glory.

No seasonable opportunity of dropping a word for Him in whose service he was engaged, was suffered to escape; so that, whether we walked or rode by the way, conversed with friends or strangers, or sat still in the house, it was evident that he had one object in view—to be about his Master's business in promoting the good of souls.

He was delighted with the beautiful and romantic scenery of the island, forming, as he would often observe, a contrast with the bold and rugged exhibitions of nature in his own land. But he was one of so heavenly a mind, that he always looked through nature up to nature's God, and was never diverted from his main concern. He saw God in all, and aimed at making every thing around, and every thing that occurred, tell to some account for the best interests of men. He watched for opportunities of usefulness, and once and again did my friend and I mark the anxiety imprinted on the countenance, and the tears trickling down the cheeks of those whom he would accost upon the road, and with whom he would stop and speak on the state of their souls, and their meetness for another world. He was indeed "instant in season, and out of season," never losing sight of the duties of his office; and there is reason to hope, that his public ministrations in these parts have left impressions which will not be speedily effaced. There were traits in Dr. Henry's character which could not fail to be discovered by every intelligent observer, who had the opportunity of seeing him during his visit to this land. He especially possessed the following distinguished excellencies:—

Warm and steady attachment to the friends of the

Redeemer, arising from supreme and ardent love to the Redeemer himself, who so loved the church as to give himself for it. With these friends he seemed to be at home. He recognized them as his brothers and sisters, in the family of Christ. His conversation among them was marked by a spirituality and heavenly mindedness, which contributed much to their individual delight and edification. It was pleasing also to observe how he sought to add to his intellectual stores, and to collect all the information he could obtain respecting the state of religion amongst the different denominations in Britain, and the manner in which our different societies are conducted. This information he repaid, by freely communicating what he knew of the state and progress of religion in the American churches, and of the manner in which the revivals that have taken place among them had commenced, and been carried on; and by pressing home an immediate and unremitting attention to the all-important interests of eternity.

Ardent zeal for the highest interests of mankind. This he displayed in embracing every opportunity afforded for instruction in righteousness. He was one of those that looked around upon the face of the earth, and saw its fallen inhabitants involved in sin and misery, labouring under the curse, and living under the condemnation of a broken law. He beheld them under these awful circumstances, dropping into a fearful eternity; and he considered himself as existing only to be instrumental in snatching some of them "as brands out of the burning."

Incessant and laborious devotedness to his Master's work. He did not live to himself. In labours he

was abundant. His friends here have often been astonished to hear what he daily went through in visiting the sick, in conversing with those under serious impressions; and in attending to the other numerous duties of his office;—all of which he appears to have fulfilled with the pleasure and delight of one who esteemed them more than his daily food. But we need wonder the less at this, when we consider how the great Head of the Church smiled upon his efforts, and rendered them so eminently successful. Success is confessedly a mighty stimulus to exertion;—it fortifies the mind against the fear of probable disappointment, it raises the soul above all difficulties, it chases the lion out of the way, and scatters to the winds the hesitations of flesh and blood. It is true, that we ought not to become weary or faint in our minds, if we have not the tokens for good which we desire; but when the Divine blessing attends our feeble efforts, O how it urges us to press forward in the work of the Lord! Our departed friend was much stimulated in this way, to his works of faith and labours of love. He was the minister of a large church, the greater part of whom were the fruits of his own ministry.

He left this country with renovated health, in the Autumn of 1826, and was conducted across the mighty deep by Him who holdeth the winds in his fist, in speed and safety to the bosom of his family and friends. There he entered again with renewed ardour upon his wonted labours; and I had the pleasure of receiving several valuable letters from him, with the manuscript of this volume, which he had prepared for the press, and kindly dedicated to

me, and which had its origin in conversations with a friend, while he was in this country. This, I hope, in its present corrected publication, will be a highly gratifying present to his numerous friends on this side of the Atlantic.

From my late dear friend I received various accounts of the remarkable revivals of religion in many parts of the United States. Some of these have been inserted in the Congregational Magazine. I was also favoured with some Sermons and other productions of Dr. Henry's pen, which do credit to his understanding and his heart; and I was indulging the hope of being able frequently to benefit the church and the world, by interesting communications of this kind; when, alas! I received the painful intelligence of his death! He "rests from his labours, and his works do follow him." "Be still," saith Jehovah, "and know that I am God." The last letter that he wrote, I am honoured and gratified in finding addressed to myself. It was written two days only before he was taken ill, and is full of tenderness and affection. The Rev. Mr. Gildersleeve kindly enclosed this highly-prized relic in a letter, which I here transcribe.

"Charleston, South Carolina, November 12, 1827.

"Rev. and dear Sir;

"You have probably received the melancholy intelligence, that the Rev. T. C. Henry has gone to his rest. He was taken ill on the 1st of October, and died on the 5th. I was with him most of the time during his last illness. The struggle was violent, but brief. His living and dying testimony sweetly har-

monized, and afforded the most comfortable evidence that God does not forsake his own in the day of trial. I send you herewith a copy of his dying expressions. As you loved him, you will wish to know how triumphantly he departed. The last letter which he wrote was left unsealed on his table, and it was addressed to you. You will esteem it, doubtless, a treasure. His warm heart was in it.

Dr. Henry was my class-mate in college; but till recently, we had been separated for about thirteen years. I esteemed him an invaluable friend. There is, dear Sir, a link that binds us together. We had a common friend that is now departed; and I trust we both have a Friend above. You are labouring for Christ. I hope also that I have some desire to serve him. Will you be so kind as to communicate, to some of the most intimate of Dr. Henry's friends, this sad intelligence. I should have written to more of them, but the vessel which carries this is soon to sail, and I am very much occupied.

“ With sentiments of respect,

“ and christian affection,

“ I am, yours, &c.

“ B. GILDERSLEEVE.”

Dying Expressions of Dr. Henry.

“ On the evening of Monday, October 1, the day on which he was taken ill, he said to a friend, ‘ I know not what the Lord intends; but if my work is done, I shall be glad to go home;’ and then repeated the following lines:—

“Sweet, to rejoice in lively hope,
That, when my change shall come,
Angels shall hover round my bed,
And waft my spirit home.’

“On Thursday, Mr. Gildersleeve said to him, ‘Do you know, my dear brother, that in the opinion of your physician, your case is very critical?’ He replied, ‘I think it possible I cannot remain long in this state.’ ‘It is more than possible that you will soon be in eternity. How do you regard your prospects for another world?’ ‘I feel a sweet, composed, delightful calm. I am willing to trust all in the hands of my Redeemer. He is now very gracious to me.’

“‘Have you a desire to depart, and be with Jesus?’ ‘I cannot say that I have any particular *desire* one way or the other. If I have a wish, it is on account of my calling, which *was*, and *is not*. I am willing to leave myself and all in the hands of God.’ Mrs. Henry said to him, ‘Can you leave *me*, and our dear little children, and the church, in his hands?’—‘Yes; I know that he can provide for you all; and I can rely on his promises and his grace; I can leave you all; my work is done.’

“Mr. Gildersleeve asked, ‘Have you any directions regarding your temporal concerns, or any message to your father?’ He replied, ‘I wish you to understand, 1st, That I have no anxiety: no—not the least, in the prospect of death.’ And then giving some directions as to his temporal concerns; he requested friends to leave the room, that he might say a few parting words to his beloved wife. He afterwards called for his children, addressed some

affectionate words to them, and gave them a parting kiss; and soon after remarked, ‘I shall soon know more of eternity than I now do. Eternity—there is my *exalted, glorious home*. Oh, how *vain*—how *trifling*—how *little* does every thing appear in the light of a nearing eternity.’

“He then requested Mr. Gildersleeve to offer up prayer; and afterwards said to Mrs. Henry, ‘My dear wife, you will now have to go alone.’ Turning to Dr. Palmer, he said, (in allusion to his wife,) ‘We have thus far passed through life sweetly together.’ To a member of his church, who stood by his bed-side, taking his hand, he said, ‘Our work will soon be done; we shall soon be in eternity. O, be ready for it!’ Alluding to his church, he said, ‘I have had that church *dear to me, very dear*; I am afraid I have loved it too much.’ He was asked, ‘Are you ready to go?’ ‘I am rejoicing under a merciful Redeemer;—if he call me away, I am safe. I like to have Mary’s dependence.’ ‘You have chosen the good part.’ ‘I have.’ I have no hope or wish on earth.’ ‘But you have above,’ it was said. ‘Yes; *sweet, sweet*. I have not the shadow of a doubt or fear upon my mind. I have not a *wish, desire, hope, or thought* on earth: they are all above. Nothing can turn my thoughts.’

“Dr. Palmer asked him, ‘Have you any anxiety in leaving your family.’ He answered, ‘I have had, but have none now. I can leave them in the Saviour’s hands; but for this I should be most miserable.’ The church, he feared, would go wrong; but being reminded of the stability of its King, he said, ‘Yes, there is safety there.’ Some time after

he exclaimed, 'Come, Lord Jesus; come quickly!' Observing the grief of his wife, he said, 'Is that right, my dear? is that right? We shall soon meet in heaven.' She replied, 'I hope so.' He answered, 'Hope so; *we must, we shall*: how could it be otherwise?' He afterwards remarked, 'God has been very merciful in sparing me so long, and making me an instrument of good.' To a friend, who came to his bed-side at that moment, and asked, 'Are you willing to depart and be with Jesus?' he replied, 'He is my all in all; my *desire, my hope, my confidence*.' In reference to the over-ruling providence of God, he said, 'It is sweet to commit every thing to God, small and great.' To another person who observed to him, 'My friend, you are happy in being prepared for the change.' He answered, 'I go rejoicing; I am safe.' At six o'clock he offered up a *short, comprehensive, connected, and fervent prayer*, and concluded by saying very emphatically, 'For the Redeemer's sake; for the *Redeemer's sake, Amen*.'

Between nine and ten o'clock of the same evening Dr. Palmer said to him, 'My dear brother, do you know me?' He replied, with great emphasis, 'Yes, my dear friend, Dr. Palmer.' 'Are your prospects still bright?' 'The same—no change—no change.' 'Has death lost its sting?' 'There is a kind of *mild, meek, sweet, departing*, going down of the soul. I am his, and he is mine.' His friend added, 'What can I want beside?' He answered, 'Nothing; having loved me, he will love me to the end.' Some little time after, he exclaimed, 'Oh, glorious expectation—glorious expectation;' and then repeated—

“ ‘Angels will hover round my bed,
And waft my spirit home—*my spirit home.*’

“ To a question proposed by Dr. Palmer, he answered, ‘I feel a sweet falling of the soul on Jesus. O, what mercy; what mercy! I do not understand it.’

“ Most of these expressions were made with a countenance lighted up by a sweet and heavenly smile.

“ Our dear friend entered upon his everlasting rest, on Friday morning, October 5, 1827, at four o’clock, aged thirty-seven years, and thirteen days.”

Thus did the happy spirit of our dear friend depart from its clay tenement, and enter into the joy of its Lord: there to be for ever with Abel, and all the martyrs; with Abraham and all the patriarchs, with Isaac and all the prophets; with Paul, and all the apostles; with Gabriel and all the angels; and above all, with Jesus, and all his ransomed people. Who does not say, “Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord?” “Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like this!”

All, indeed, are not so highly favoured in their departing moments, as to die fully assured of their personal interest in Christ, and rejoicing in the confident hope of eternal life. That some, like our departed friend, are blessed with these peculiar marks of the Divine favour, both scripture and experience prove; and the death of every such individual is, in each case, a triumphant evidence of the truth of our holy religion. But many of God’s people, at the solemn hour of quitting the scenes of sin and sorrow, may pass under a cloud, and be exceedingly harassed by

the assaults of their fell adversary. What is said, however, of those who accompanied Paul in his voyage to Rome, and who were exposed to extreme danger, will be eminently verified in the experience of all those who seem to be broken by the tempests occasioned by indwelling sin, the malevolence of Satan, and the hidings of their heavenly Father's face, at the time of their entering the swellings of Jordan: "And the rest, some on boards, and some on broken pieces of the ship; and so it came to pass that they escaped all safe to land."

Several in this country, I understand, were greatly impressed by the ministrations and conversation of our departed friend. It is my heart's desire and prayer concerning them, that their goodness may not be found like "the morning cloud, and the early dew;" that he may not appear as a witness against them in the day of retribution; but rather that he may have to say concerning them, as well as his numerous spiritual children in America, "Behold, I and the children whom the Lord hath given me!" Should any one of them cast an eye on these pages, let me entreat him to beware of returning to the vanities and follies of the world, and exhort him to persevere in "seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness."

The world, with all its fascinations of pleasure and pride, allures but to disappoint, and leaves the credulous sinner a prey to guilt, remorse, and ruin. It may promise much, but it has nothing substantial to bestow. It can do nothing for us in affliction, or in the prospect of death and eternity. Let us labour, then, "not for the meat that perisheth, but for that

which endureth to eternal life." "One thing is needful;" may it have our supreme regard; and may we be found "followers of them who, through faith and patience, inherit the promises!"

*Some Extracts from the Sermon preached in the
Second Presbyterian Church in Charleston,
October 6, 1827, at the Funeral of Dr. Henry,
by the Rev. B. Gildersleeve.*

THERE may not be an individual present who had an earlier acquaintance with our deceased friend, than he who officiates on this mournful occasion. HENRY had then but recently embraced his Saviour: he had then all the ardour of a first love, sweetly mingling with an ardent constitutional temperament. He would then talk of Jesus, and the riches of his grace. And the private walk, and the prayer meeting, and the social circle, where religion was the theme, can bear witness to the spirituality of his feelings, in the early part of his christian life. He was then the bosom companion of PARSONS and FISK, whose labours have since been finished in a foreign clime, and with whom, we have reason to believe, he is now uniting in worship at the feet of his Saviour. Amid the innumerable temptations of a college-course, nothing occurred to tarnish, in the slightest degree, his christian character. Having, in the providence and grace of God, received a call, as he confidently believed, to the ministry of the Lord Jesus, neither the solicitations of friends, nor the splendid prospects

of temporal gain, could divert him from his purpose. He gave up all for Christ; and a stronger testimony of piety than this cannot be afforded.

* * * *

Neither to you, who are the fruits of his ministry; nor to you, who have been strengthened by his prayers and labours of love: nor to you, who, uninfluenced by prejudice, can appreciate true piety, need I tell how ardently he was engaged in the cause of his Master, and how successfully he laboured for the good of souls. His eulogy is written on your hearts; and your memory will often peruse it.

* * * *

How well our dear departed friend was furnished for the work, the variety in his discourses, replete with matter and seasoned with grace, abundantly testifies. Though possessing a vigorous and rapid intellect, he trusted it not, in the haste with which it was accustomed to seize a subject, until he had examined and re-examined it by the “Law and the Testimony.” He took no man for his model. He was wedded to no system of opinions. “I am unwilling”—was one of his last expressions—“to say that any denomination is altogether right.” He saw defects in every human creed: and his own, he endeavoured to rectify by the *Word* of life. The Holy Scriptures were his daily study. He had become more familiar with the original languages in which they were written; and he availed himself of those helps in understanding them with which he was richly furnished, in the writings of ancient and modern divines. *To study*, he considered the duty of a minister, and he pursued it with pleasure. At least eight hours every

day, unless there was some peculiar and extraordinary call, were sacredly devoted to the improvement of his mind. He was anxious to raise the standard of ministerial qualifications. In his diligence, he succeeded for himself: in his example, there is a keen reproof to those who are idle in the vineyard of Christ. As an evidence of his superior attainments, his writings procured for him the degree of Doctor in Divinity, from one of the oldest and most respectable colleges of our country, at an earlier age than any individual on whom that Institution has conferred this distinction. His works that have been published would do no discredit to the most eminent divine; and one now in the press, and another which he had nearly completed, will, doubtless go down to future ages, and prove a rich blessing to the cause of Christ. In all his studies, he had but one object; the glory of his Master, the good of souls. The honours of the world were to him mere secondary considerations. He did not ardently covet, nor affectedly despise them. When given, he used them as he would any other treasure, in subserviency to the best of causes.

* * * *

His discourses, though addressed principally to the intellect of man, were nevertheless practical and pointed. Having a thorough knowledge of the human heart, he could trace it in all its self-excusing, and present it to the individual so accurately delineated, that he could not mistake it. He thus held up the mirror to the different characters before him; and each understood him as saying, "Thou art the man." And this, after all, is the preaching which proves successful; whatever angry thoughts or expres-

sions it may excite. These are the weapons which are "mighty through God, to the pulling down of strong holds." As an evidence of his fidelity, let me appeal to the state of this church when your late Pastor accepted your call, and ask you to contemplate the revolution which less than four years has produced. Inquire for your active members, and you will find very many of them his spiritual children. Almost could he have adopted in reference to you, the language of the apostle to the Corinthians; "For though ye have ten thousand instructors, yet have ye not many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel." In adducing these seals to his ministry as an evidence of his faithfulness, I would not be understood to say, that fidelity is always accompanied with success. For many who have been faithful, even unto death, have "laboured in vain and spent their strength for nought."

* * * *

He was faithful in his preparations for the sacred desk. He considered it a sin to offer to the Lord that which cost him nothing. He sought out acceptable words. He consulted the different capacities of his hearers, that he might afford to each his portion in due season. In order to give "line upon line and precept upon precept," he varied his modes of expression; and by new, yet familiar illustrations, he arrested the attention, and reached the heart. He compared scripture with scripture, with peculiar facility and effect. There are few passages which he had not examined. And even to many of those which have been considered the most difficult, he has given a clear, and not unfrequently, a new solution. For

the afflicted, he had always a word of consolation. To the wealthy, he could say, "Use this world as not abusing it." The poor in spirit, he could point to a heavenly treasure; and the broken in heart, to the balm of Gilead. The aged, he would respectfully intreat. The young, he would tenderly admonish. And for transgressors, he would search out some tender, yet faithful reproof. In a word, none were passed by. In his study, as well as in his public administration of the word and ordinances, he laboured for you all. And in his prayers, he even remembered those, on whom doctrine, and reproof, and instruction in righteousness had failed to produce the desired effect.

* * * * *

I appeal to that flock of which he, under Christ, was the Shepherd, and ask, if he ever treated any of you with the slightest neglect. To an affectionate people, the personal attention of their pastor affords a peculiar enjoyment. In this respect, you have been highly favoured; for his visits have been more frequent than you had reason to expect; and more frequent, I venture to affirm, than those of almost any other minister similarly situated. Not merely once a year, did you all see him at your houses, but once a month, and once a week, and once a day, when there was any peculiar or special call. Nor did he go to feast upon your bounty. His grand object was to lead you to Christ: to impress upon your minds those solemn truths which were the subject of his public discourses; to enter into your feelings and views, your hopes and fears, your anxieties and cares; that he might then give a word adapted to your case; that he might

bear you in his prayers before the throne of God ; and that, by knowing your wants, he might be the better prepared to discharge the duties of the sanctuary. And you well know how gently he led you, how tenderly he admonished, and how meekly he bore the scoffs of the reproachful. No eye has seen but Heaven's, and no other ear has heard, the anxiety he felt for your spiritual welfare. Even when he could not have access in person to the children of his flock, he has sought to reach them by a direct and affectionate address in the form of an epistle. His thoughts must have been dwelling upon some "often reproved" sinner of his congregation, in connexion with his own dissolution, when he last visited his study ; for on a loose sheet of paper there was written, and they appear to be the last words which he ever pencilled :

"FOR THE PASTOR'S FUNERAL."

"Congeal the breath of prayer for him into the frost of the second death."

And alas ! thought I, as my eye glanced upon these lines, was it his own funeral that he was anticipating ? And is the breath of his prayers congealed into the frost of the second death to multitudes who have sat under his ministry ?

* * * *

He was faithful to his brethren in the ministry. He withheld from them nothing which, he conceived, might render them more useful in the church of Christ. Holding a severe eye over his own failings and infirmities, he was ready to give the most favourable construction of the motives and conduct of others. Ever

ready to communicate, he would unbother his whole soul to those who would let him; and he only asked to be treated with the same frankness in return. None ever told him his errors without receiving his grateful acknowledgments for the favour. And even where he has unjustly lain under the imputation of a fault, he has borne it himself, lest, by an explanation, he should implicate another. Those of us who have enjoyed his special friendship, know well how just are these remarks. And if we have not profited by our intercourse with him, we have at least enjoyed an opportunity for which we are answerable. He rejoiced in a brother's prosperity; and when a brother was depressed, he sought to elevate him by his counsel, his recommendation and his prayers.

* * * *

Born of affectionate and affluent parents, he received their indulgence in early life, almost to the full extent of his desires; nor did he ever know, by experience, what is meant by "the pinchings of poverty." Yet wealth he considered a sacred deposit, lent, not given; and the possessor under the most solemn obligation to render for it an exact account. The amount of his benefactions I am unable to state; but from sources on which I can rely, I have reason to believe that few men, in his circumstances, have expended more in the cause of charity, or made greater sacrifices for the good of the church. His last bequest of his whole very select and valuable library, is an evidence that the Sons of the Prophets and the cause of Missions were first in his affections.

* * * *

Sensitive as our brother might have been, when reports to the wounding of his reputation reached his ear, he did not suffer them to make an indelible impression upon his heart. He would go to the offender in the spirit of the gospel, and if not rudely repelled, he would make him feel the embraces of a friendly arm. To forgive—O, it was sweet to his soul!—for he felt himself a sinner forgiven. Not a trace was left upon his heart of what had been;—when his lips had attested his satisfaction. There was no coldness—no reserve—no cautious manner that indicated the abiding of the old leaven;—for his forgiveness was full, free, cheerful—and often, instead of its being sought, he himself afforded every facility, and tried every expedient to bestow it with safety and effect. There is no trait in the christian character more lovely than this; nor any that shone brighter in the assemblage of our brother's virtues. Did he observe a coldness in the expressions or manner of those whom he had been accustomed affectionately to meet?—he would either search out and remove the cause, by a direct inquiry and full explanation; or endeavour to win them back to his bosom by redoubled attentions. But even in this, he would make no sacrifice of principle. While he felt it his duty to keep a conscience void of offence towards man, he felt it equally imperious to keep it void of offence towards his God. As he was ready to forgive, so he was to ask forgiveness upon the slightest conviction of error. And when withheld, as it sometimes was, where he had inadvertently offended—O, it grieved him to the heart. At peace with God, he wished to live and die at peace with man.

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*Brief Extracts from the Correspondence of the
late Dr. T. C. Henry with his Friends in
England.*

“ IF the interviews we have had on earth produce their legitimate tendency on the mind, we shall both be gainers for time and eternity. If any other tendency be their result, we shall be infinite losers. O for a spirit of active piety; to labour daily for the Redeemer's cause, to gather a heavenly atmosphere around us, to fling new light of duty on the paths of our associates and friends ! How often I have thought, what a happy life this must be ; prayer and agency assisting each other : a co-working with God. Let us begin such a life. The weaknesses to which we are exposed will best be remedied by the prayer and the effort to be ‘ strong in the Lord.’ ”

“ If, in addition to the pleasure which I received in my European excursion, and the new acquisition of friends and restored health, I have indeed been rendered of any use as an instrument in the hand of God, I have abundant reason to rejoice. When I look over the several letters received from Islington and Henley, I cannot but indulge the hope that God has blessed the excursion both to others and to myself. O, it is humbling indeed, to think of the great goodness of the Head of the church, contrasted with

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our own ill-desert: and it should keep us low, when we think of that sovereignty which selects such agents in his glorious cause. But how much we could accomplish in a work on which heavenly spirits love to look, if we had only the disposition!"

"It is true, we are disposed to shrink back when we look at our own vileness. We cannot disconnect activity and zeal, where they are sincere, from a devotional mind; and we dread leaving the impression with others, that we are more holy than we know ourselves to be. We are also disposed to wait for more ardent feelings, to propel us to faithfulness: we find it hard, when in a state of coldness, to obtain our own consent to activity. And yet all this is a sad perversion of precepts and things. Conviction of duty should lead the Christian to an agency at once; he is not to wait until he thinks himself in a right temper to do as he is commanded; any more than is the impenitent sinner, under conviction, to refuse to abandon his sins, or to pray until God has given him a new set of feelings and views."

"The Christian should ever recollect, that activity is part of his profession: and if it invite the eye of the world to fix more keenly on him, the consciousness of this gives him a greater reason for holiness of example. Nay; the Christian should recollect that activity in duty and private devotion reciprocally assist each other. Many a child of the Redeemer languishes in sorrow, simply because his whole profession is selfish in its nature and character. For myself, I am more and more convinced that we are

in an error here, from which we have reason to awaken in astonishment. O let *us* begin a new life ! ”

“ The description you give of your family, at the date of your letter, is truly interesting. May that house be indeed a Bethel, ‘ a house of God ! ’ May Jesus delight to visit it, as he visited the abode of Martha and Mary : and whenever death makes a chasm in its circle, may he be nigh to you as he was to them, to say, ‘ I am the resurrection and the life ! ’ There is not a more interesting season on earth, than that of the domestic altar, belonging to a circle whom kindred ties of both nature and grace have bound together.”

“ You ask for a thought or two on the subject of an early *profession* of religion, where the *principles* are decided. If we are sure of the premises, there can be no difficulty in finding an answer here. If a child of twelve years old, early as that period is, were known to be decided in religion, principle there must necessarily be, and ‘ judgment to discern the Lord’s body ; ’ and such a one has no right to hold back from a public profession. It is both his privilege and his duty to come forward. He will grow in grace and increase in strength, while he obeys the order of divine love.

“ But, in assuming these premises, you presuppose very much. How are you to ascertain that the principles are fixed ? The most marked changes may be fictitious. The young may easily deceive themselves ; as indeed we all too readily do. They are often sanguine ; and, when they are not so of them-

selves, the imprudence of friends frequently renders them so. Indeed, there is nothing I more dread than the interfering advice of ill-judging and partial friends, whenever the young are seriously impressed. Under every circumstance of age or condition, I have preferred holding back the convert, for the space of not less than two months ; and in respect of youth I would carry this practice still further, and that in proportion to the fewness of the party's years."

" Strange things await us in futurity. A wonderful developement is to be made at the bar of God. Our associations in life, our social dependences, our domestic relations ;—what numerous, what diversified, and what deep-tending issues, are to arise from them all ! It is when we view the judgment-seat through the medium of such thoughts as these, that it assumes its most characteristic usefulness. It is when we extend our eye through the far-stretched line of consequences. It is not the individual commission of sin, it is not the perpetration of personal iniquity, painful as this is, which makes up the most appalling anticipation of the awaiting decision. It is the influence we have had, and the part we have taken, and the example we have set in the affairs of immortal souls ; it is the far-reaching result through them in their turn again. We shall never understand how consequences multiply, until we behold them examined before the throne of the heavens."

" You have said, Farewell, till we meet at the bar of God ! Our next meeting will indeed most probably be there. This consideration is painful ; but it ought

to be salutary. Farewell then, dear friend ; and may he that dwelt in the bush be your cloud by day, and your pillar in the darkness of night !”

“ I am pleased to discern, in the whole tenor of your letter, the breathings of a desire to be a co-worker with Christ, and to be instrumental in promoting his glory. This is the *only* desire we can entertain on earth, which does not subject us to the probability of disappointment. The immortal soul demands some stable point around which its energies may safely play, without exhaustion from its efforts, or precariousness in its hopes. The good of Zion, and nothing else, will form such a stable centre : and it is surprising how numerous are the opportunities of advancing the interests of the Redeemer’s kingdom, which present themselves to him whose habitual inquiry is, ‘ Lord, what wilt thou have me to do ? ’ ”

“ Next to the possession of grace, the highest virtue in the Christian calendar, is that of ‘ hungering and thirsting after righteousness : ’ and yet this is only a mode of speaking, as logicians say. The Christian’s experience comprises nothing but paradoxes. The desire for any thing in other concerns, betokens the want of it : not so in Christianity. The *earnest* and *panting* desire for grace, evinces its existence in the heart already ; and it ought to lay hold of that faith which imparts resolution to appropriate the promises. It proves no title to property in a worldly court, that the claimant earnestly wishes it : but, in the chancery of Heaven, a sincere longing goes far to establish the claim.”

“There are two errors into which we are likely to fall. One is the spirit of legalism, and the other a desire of the praise of men. The latter is easily detected. But, however acceptable, in the sight of the world, retiring piety and a good example may be, zealous activity in all the details of religion, and earnest efforts to save the souls of others, is a course not sufficiently popular to furnish an enticement to zeal. The personal reward to be obtained, is not sufficiently alluring to arouse us from our natural indolence. Legalism is more dangerous. It takes so many shapes, that we are always more or less in danger from its insidiousness.”

“Leave all contingencies of times to *Him* who has your destiny in his hands, and who will prepare what is best for you in due season. O it is a sweet feeling, when we can realize it, that all which belongs to us is in the hands of our heavenly Father! He can make use of our very fears and hopes, our disappointments and our joys, for our present as well as our future good. True happiness belongs only to him who lies passive in the hands of his Maker.”

“I hope we shall be spared to meet in London three or four years hence. But, O what changes await us before that much of the wheel shall have rolled over!”

“For my own health, after which you inquire, it is now excellent. I have nothing to complain of in all my circumstances of life, but an ungrateful heart. An affectionate people under my charge—a family

all I could wish them, (do not smile at my partiality,) enough to provide the comforts of life—good health.—What more, but a feeling of practical gratitude ought I to ask for?”

Dec. 26, 1826. “It is a matter of surprise to me that from the many ministers to whom I wrote with the promise of a full reply, I have received no answer, save from ——— and yourself. From ——— and ——— especially, I was very desirous of hearing. It mortifies our pride to be forgotten : but it is something more painful where we have ourselves been favourably prepossessed. *I must go over to England again, and try to behave better ; to make a better impression.*

“How like the memory of a dream, the scenes of the past summer are flitting before me ! The review is a happy one, in most of its details : and it is completely so in all those parts in which you and your dear family appear. In truth, I ought to thank you, and those under your roof, for the unremitting hospitality and kindness which I received at your hands. If you would in any way draw upon me for a return, how it would gratify me to shew you my promptness in honouring your drafts ! And ——— too, whom I regard not the less because he dubs my native country a refractory child ; say all that is kind to him from me. I was prepared to admire Great Britain for the talent to which she has given birth : but I honour her for the specimens of heart of which I have seen so many. I could not repress the names of some of you, from the little groups of my flock who have been constantly meeting at my house since

my return, and who really seem to share in my sense of your goodness and hospitality. And then Mrs. Henry—in whom there is more than a ‘woman’s curiosity’ to see you—begs the acceptance of her own regard by one whom she fancies she knows already. The Lord has indeed crowned my life with loving-kindness. On my return, I found that but two of my congregation had made an exchange of worlds during my absence. It is true they were spiritual children, and the loss was therefore painful; but there is every thing to solace us in their departure. The rest of my people had been waiting, with some degree of patience, and with undiminished affection, for my return to their fold. And they do indeed seem grateful that I have resumed my charge with renewed and vigorous health. You will deem my situation in life a singular one, my dear friend, when I tell you that I have not an earthly want, that the only petitions I can frame to our heavenly Father are those of a spiritual character. And I am the more impressed with some consciousness of the danger of this prosperity, since this morning looking over your papers relative to the ‘Associate Fund’ Society. You do indeed exhibit an affecting spectacle among the prophets of the spiritual Israel. What vast good could such a man as our friend ——— do? I cannot but hope that he will one day take hold of this business. How much could one such muscular arm achieve!

“It is certainly, as you say, a matter of gratitude that the great Head of the church has rendered me useful to any immortal soul during my absence. And yet, my dear sir, I have never desired the comfort which others gather from such a source. When I

remember how completely the instrument is in the hands of God—not only *to do*, but *to will*; when I see, as I have often seen, the weakest instruments selected; I am disposed to merge all considerations, touching the usefulness of a minister, into the sovereignty of God. I make this remark with the limitation you well understand. But who has not seen, in the mode of divine operation, that the manner and circumstances of any effected good prove it wholly of the Lord? And is there not as much reason for humility as there is for gratification in this thought? Does not the whole subject carry us more effectually to a sight of our own utter worthlessness and neglects and folly?—Blessed be God, he is disposed to smile upon the faithful exercise of means: and here I cannot but think the dissenting brethren of Great Britain are less wise, than in their schemes of more general benevolence. Their Sabbath schools are reduced to better system, and *at least* as well taught in doctrine as ours. But the practical warnings, and exhortations which the pupils receive, are few and defective. And hence the number of actual hopeful conversions, in that nursery of piety, are much less numerous than on this side of the Atlantic. A similar remark may be made of the ‘Bethel Union,’ in Great Britain; where the old system of a Floating Chapel is still kept up, and the essential improvement of *boarding-houses* for the sailors is not introduced. In the houses of God, your pulpits are ably and faithfully supplied. But each individual is not singled out by the pastor as a field of personal labour in himself. Your country—and I too can say *dear England*—is an example to the world, and the glory

of christendom. But her efforts, however wonderful and praiseworthy, are too general, too little defined. O for the effects of a few revivals in your favoured land! Give your ministers an effective pastoral character, and you brighten the prospects of the dissenting interest. Will you forgive all this? I have been praising England full well and cordially since my return; but to an English friend I can speak with equal freedom of an existing fault. This reminds me of another means of doing good. Have you a Christian Almanack in Great Britain? We have one for each of our States. Or did we borrow this device from you? The one of this State, which I send you, gives some ecclesiastical information. The remarks relative to a defective support of the clergy refer to our back settlements. This is an easy way of doing good; as every family needs an almanack."

March 30, 1827. "When I last wrote I sent you a Christian Almanack. Have they ever been introduced into England? Another means of very general benefit is our religious newspapers, which are very numerous, and being so very cheap, they are taken by the poorer classes as well as by the rich. I now forward you a specimen of them. Could you not get them into vogue in England? They are admirably adapted to promote the religious and benevolent operations of the day, and to promote revivals. What good might be done to the dissenting interest by these vehicles of information! Let me now consult you confidentially on a question in my own affairs, and use the candour you have always shewn me in your answer. ——— once observed to me,

IX EXTRACTS FROM THE CORRESPONDENCE.

and it was a little before I embarked, that it was, and long had been, a matter of surprise to him, that no work existed which fairly detailed the feelings of the Religious Inquirer, or entered into the details of his trials and complaints and difficulties. The idea seemed to me essentially important. Very many inquirers give up because they do not understand the nature of their perplexities. And a work, that would enter into the familiarities of heart and feeling on this subject, I have thought might be of service to the adviser as well as to the inquirer himself; especially where no judicious minister is at hand to be consulted, or where diffidence keeps back from consultation. I commenced such a work as soon as I well could, after settling down in my library again. I have now written, not transcribed, about two hundred pages."

TO

INTRODUCTION

THOMAS LEWIS,

MINISTER OF UNION CHAPEL,

ISLINGTON,

The following Pages

ARE VERY RESPECTFULLY INSCRIBED,

IN TOKEN OF THE ESTEEM

IN WHICH HE IS HELD

BY

THE AUTHOR.

INTRODUCTION.

WHILE the religious public have been well provided with doctrinal and practical works, and furnished with many valuable expositions of the word of God ; and while the divine system of Christianity itself has been ably defended against the cavils of its assailants ; it is a matter of surprise to many, that a most interesting department of sacred literature has been either entirely neglected, or occupied by remarks of so general a nature as to answer very imperfectly the end for which they were designed. I refer to that department of instruction which is suited to the *particular exigencies of a religious inquirer, or an awakened sinner.*

There is certainly no state of mind which involves more interest in its issue, or presents a more imperative claim on our sympathies, or brings more effectually into exercise our hopes and our fears, than that of the man who has been partially aroused from the slumber of spiritual death, and looks around him with an agitated feeling, to ask, “What shall I do to be saved?”

To awaken the conscience to at least a momentary activity, is very often far more easy than to meet that class of perplexities and cares to which such an excitement may lead. Hence we see many, who find it no hard task to point the penalty of the law to the heart of the sinner, and to bring in array before him the terrors of an offended God; and yet whose whole instructions, to one in this interesting state, are so vague and ill-defined, as to shed no light upon his path, and to give him no clear conceptions of his real condition.

Two things strike an observer of the awakened sinner, and call for all the prudence and caution with which advice or counsel may be given: these are—his DIFFICULTIES and his DANGERS.

Among the difficulties of which he is ready to complain, is that of the want of something suitable to his own peculiar state. We follow apostolic example when we recommend him to "believe and repent." But he is not unapt to tell us, that he requires a more detailed and explicit direction than this. We commend him to prayer and the word of God. But even the effort to regard this injunction, he informs us, furnishes new cares, and exhibits new obstacles in his way. His necessities multiply, and his demands increase.

Now it would be easy to charge much of the evil upon himself, and prove to him from the economy of grace and the character of God, that all the fault lies within his own heart; and this is a melancholy truth of which we should not permit him to lose sight. But he returns from all this, to ask the particular character of the default, its causes, and the means of its removal.

If we put into his hands any of the valuable and well-known treatises which have been designed to alarm the unconverted sinner, he will most probably assent to the truths they contain;

but, though his convictions are deepened, his personal difficulties are still not reached. There is much, very much, which remains unexplained ; and which, while it lasts, multiplies itself ; or extends through new ramifications, and creates new embarrassments. His demand becomes more importunate, for some instruction adapted to that idiosyncrasy of character, which he conceives to distinguish his present condition. Here is an eagerness of appetite which disposes him to seize, with avidity, on all that bears a remote resemblance to the fancied object of his wants. And it is to meet this, that any counsel we may give, should enter as far as possible into the familiarities of the heart. Yet to do so, important as it is, requires some further knowledge of the case than we may be able to obtain.

Where the inquirer is disposed to present the exact state of his mind, and where he is able to define his feelings, the plain good sense of a private Christian may enable him to say all that is necessary. But the inquirer is not always willing to do the former ; and he is very often

incompetent to accomplish the latter. Yet indisposed or unable, as he may be, to do either, his solicitude is not the less to learn the grand secret of the causes and the remedy of his moral disorder.

Now, if we are unable to meet the whole of this question, there is one thing which it is not out of our power to do : I mean that of furnishing to the sight of the sufferer, cases which supply many instructive resemblances to his own.

Were we even at a loss to account, in all respects, for the existence of a particular experience, we may do much for the inquirer by only describing it. We prevent painful conclusions, which he is very apt to deduce from the supposed singularity of his situation ; and we enable him to draw some important inferences which may preserve him from the extremes of presumption or despair. We abstract his attention from extraneous cares, and fix it on something which may give a clue to the windings of his heart. The sooner we can effect this desirable end, the greater probability is there of a favourable issue : and the longer he is detained

from it, the greater is his hazard of fatal self-deception, or of an equally fatal relinquishment of the interests of his soul.

But the dangers to which the inquirer is exposed are often commensurate with his difficulties. Among these, not the least may be found in the well meant, but injudicious, advice of pious friends. A work, then, which will furnish scriptural directions, suited to different states of mind, consequent on the natural disposition, or the temporal circumstances of the awakened sinner, cannot but be desirable.

Or, if there be no hazard of a fictitious peace from any of those sources, it may be the lot of the inquirer to be out of the reach of competent persons to whom he might impart his anxieties, and from whose experimental knowledge he might obtain instruction, caution, or encouragement. In such circumstances it is but too probable that all solicitude for immortal interests may be abandoned in hopelessness ; or recourse may be had to soul-ruining error ; or a not less delusive postponement to an imagined more favourable season, may ensue.

In the private musings, too, of one in such a state, there may be imminent danger: not only from his false expectations, but from the sophistry of his heart, and the excuses which he secretly gives to his conscience. Present disappointment induces him to look somewhere else for relief: and thousands, in a land of gospel-light, have given up all effort, under secret pleas as dishonourable to God as they are destructive to themselves. To enumerate these pleas and to exhibit their criminality, might be an important engagement for one who acts as counsellor: but it belongs to a field by far too large to be occupied in every instance of application for advice; while the secret path of deception in which the inquirer is wandering, may be far away from suspicion. A volume, then, which would answer this end might assist the adviser, while it rendered the folly and inconsistency of the awakened sinner distinctly visible to his own sight.

If it be asked, whether I give the following pages to the public, with a full confidence in their adaptation to remove all these difficulties and to obviate all these dangers, I answer, No.

Well informed readers, and perhaps some who are not so, will observe defects which have not escaped my own eye; and possibly many which have not occurred to me in a hasty review. But although my expectations of complete success in this effort are not sanguine, they are sufficient to warrant the trust that it has not entirely failed.

I am persuaded that there are few inquirers who will not find something to meet at least part of their difficulties; and they will be the last to complain, if the details which are given should be considered by others as too numerous and too particular. And if the nature of this work require occasional repetition, it will be a small objection to one whose mind is eagerly intent on learning all that relates to his spiritual condition; and who must see that the same perplexity, anxiety, or fear, often arises from very different causes.

It will not be supposed that the subjects discussed in this volume are treated to exhaustion. Nor is it necessary that they should be. Designed as the work is for a certain class only, it can hardly be expected that all in which the

Christian is interested should be examined. Yet I would humbly hope, that even the more matured child of God will find in these pages something of interest to his own soul.

Many, alas ! there are, who once belonged to the former of these classes, but are now numbered with neither ; for they have returned to mingle with the careless world, after hours of anxiety for their salvation. To such, the feelings of former days recalled, and the excuses of a melancholy apostasy reviewed, may not be without some practical benefit.

Perhaps the examples given will be considered too numerous. But I have thought that they might be an advantageous medium, through which some ideas would more distinctly appear. Not one of them is fictitious ; and, excepting where the contrary is expressly mentioned, they have fallen under my personal observation. It is of small importance that the language put into the mouths of those examples, is not exactly their own. This could not be recollected. But a faithful adherence to the substance and spirit of what they uttered, has been inviolably preserved.

I have availed myself of any advantage which I could obtain from the works of other authors : and where it has appeared necessary to do so, or where the quotations have been literal, I have named them. But they have been few. I have attempted to draw for materials rather on the word of God, and on life as I have seen it, than on the writings of others.

One more remark may appear necessary. The following letters are exactly what they purport to be; written to a friend, with a design to assist him in his inquiries for salvation. If it be thought that they may be of service to other persons under similar circumstances, I shall be gratified in the concurrence of that hope with my own. If not, there is some consolation, under the failure, in the thought that they have been written with a sincere desire to aid the cause of religion. They are sent into the world with few pretensions; but accompanied, as they were in the act of writing them, with prayer in their behalf, to the Great Head of the church.

THE AUTHOR.

LETTERS TO A FRIEND.

LETTER I.

An undue disposition to privacy commonly accompanying serious impressions.—Hurtful tendency of such feelings.—The critical state of an awakened sinner.—Higher aggravations attach to sin.—Small circumstances become solemnly important.—An awful instance of abandoned convictions.—Advice adapted to such a crisis.

MY DEAR SIR,

How shall we account for that secrecy of feeling which you have found it so difficult to infringe, and which is so common to the experience of awakened sinners? that delicacy which guards the threshold of religion, and restricts the conversation of intimate friends to its exterior and general matters? Shall we attribute it to a greater degree of refinement, or to a nicer sense of decorum? But it is as prevalent among the ruder, as among the more polished classes of society. Shall we ascribe it to an unwillingness to obtrude our griefs upon the sympathy of friends? This would be an apology in which fact would not sus-

tain us ; for he to whom we unbosom our sorrow, is supposed to take a deep and unaffected interest in our spiritual welfare. And, moreover, this privacy is discoverable in the very man, who, instead of comprehending the sentiment of a Christian poet, that

—— “ with the soul who ever felt the sting
“ Of sorrow, sorrow is a *sacred* thing,”

would, at other times, drag you rudely through all the minutiae of his private woes. Nor is a want of confidence the cause of this restraint ; for every other feeling may be imparted with freedom. Nor can it be wholly, if at all, owing to the confessed etiquette of irreligious society, which proscribes the subject of evangelical truth, much as a law of Athens prohibited the name of death : nor to that disgust which arises from a familiar and ill-timed use of scriptural terms : nor to any thing else which could furnish an excuse, while it implies a compliment to our refinement, our taste, or understanding.

These questions and answers, if they serve no other purpose, may at least lead you to the conclusion that you are not alone : numberless other voices utter the same complaint ; and the subject, in its different shapes, has given rise to a thousand discussions ; and has led to a variety of artificial rules of Christian conduct. Professors of religion, who sincerely desire to promote the

best interest of their friends, have frequently proposed such queries as the following: How shall I express my concern for one who is prepared at all times to interrupt me, by saying, "This is a private matter between God and myself;" and who feels that he has reason for offence in a rude invasion of his tranquillity? How shall I introduce the subject of religion in a circle where it may be received with symptoms of impatience, or with that listless silence which hints its dismissal? And, after all that can be said, there is an art in the successful introduction of a religious topic, which is less easily attained than zeal; a happy *tact*, which even the profane often admire, but which requires qualities that long experience and fervent piety may not be able to confer.

But this delicacy of feeling—(we will give it its current title, although it belongs to that class of things which have wrong names, and which are embraced in the forbidden practice of calling evil good and good evil)—this delicacy of feeling, while it forbids the obtrusion of religious views, lest they create offence, and shuts the lips of the awakened sinner, is not a rare ingredient in the characters of many who entertain a trust that they have been the subjects of saving grace. There are those, who have sustained a long and tedious struggle in their hearts; who, possessing a

faint hope that they have passed from death unto life, relinquish the ordinary pleasures of the world, and engage in all the duties which are fulfilled by a lukewarm professor of religion—except the duty of profession itself; and who, while they lead a cheerless life, seem not to consider that what they deem an apology for neglect, is the very sin which keeps them suspended between heaven and earth, unfit for the enjoyment of either.

Even after a public profession of faith has been made, evils are multiplied from the same cause; not only when the Christian and the worldling, in their ordinary interviews, consider the topic of religion forbidden ground to both, but in the discharge of many of those obligations which both reason and revelation enjoin. A valued friend once told me, that one of the most painful trials he had ever known, was in laying the foundation of his domestic altar. On other matters he could speak freely; and private devotion occupied a due proportion of his time. But the conflict in his bosom was long and severe before he could persuade himself to become “the minister to his family.” And can it be doubted that thousands of the rising generation retire from the family every evening, and launch out into the world every morning, *unblessed*, because parental prayer has been restrained? Or can it be doubted, that this single neglect has checked the influence of many

a parental example, which might have led the offspring to serious thought and to eternal salvation?

There is another modification of this delicacy, which attaches suspicion to it in all its forms. Social intimacy is often seriously injurious to that Christian fellowship on which the prosperity, if not the life, of personal piety depends. This may seem a singular position: and it would be so but for the very matter now before us. The truth is one of every day's observation, that husbands and wives often converse more freely on the experimental points of piety, with those who are comparatively strangers, than with each other. The bond which nature has formed between relatives, and which time has rivetted, appears too frequently loosened, when we find that incongruous reluctance to converse together on matters of piety; and when we have seen even children more ready to open their minds on this subject, to friends less nearly allied, than to the parent who has watched over them with prayerful solicitude. How is all this? Is there something defective in Christianity itself? or something that changes the nature of our mutual relations? Not at all. There may be different causes which produce different degrees of influence towards these effects, but still the mover of all this mischief is that most secret of agents—*pride*. There is no need of defining, no need of explaining the opera-

tion of this principle ; and it is wholly useless to quarrel with terms. Let him who speaks of this *delicacy*, and continues to foster it, examine the first feelings to which it gives rise ; let him compare these feelings together, and note well their selfishness ; and see if it be possible to escape our conclusion. Yes, pride has its retired habits as well as modesty ; its seemly aspect, and its very diffidence of manner. And it is hence, that, among the children of God, the consciousness that their mutual infirmities are known to each other, and the corresponding fear that they might generate a distrust of their sincerity, very often stand in the way of a fulfilment of that prophecy which the latter days shall complete ; “ Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another.”

You have sometimes seen the mind which nature had rendered ingenuous and frank, drooping under cherished woes—bending beneath a weight it strove to conceal—mingling bitterness with domestic peace, and discontent with outward prosperity—until the hand that was about to set the spirit free from its tabernacle, laid bare to the sight the wounds that festered within ; and the rapidly approaching terrors of a death-hour broke the fetter of restraint—and for the first time, the sufferer could ask, “ What shall I do to be saved ?”

Or, where the mind dared not brood over its

disquietudes, and was equally unwilling to divulge them, how often have religious impressions, which seemed nigh to some good hope, left their place to a spurious peace, which continued unbroken through life!

“ But there *are* moments,”—you say,—“ when you are not only anxious to hear all that can be said on this subject, but almost willing to inquire of those around you.” A more intense feeling of danger would certainly produce this effect. Even pride gives way in a season of peril. A greater passion usurps the seat of a lesser, when the two cannot reign together. And you have, perhaps, witnessed in another, that hardly-repressed anxiety of manner, which solicited an inquiry into its cause—that distant hinting at a subject there was not quite boldness enough to introduce; and you saw, plainly, the cause of all this, through the miserable efforts to conceal it. But because that hint was not taken, and that exposed anxiety was not reached by a single question, and the theme of religion was still kept back, the half-awakened inquirer suppressed a murmur at the disappointment, and, in the petulance of a mortified child, gave up the whole matter, with the self-consoling thought, “ It is partly the fault of others if I perish.” Here is pride acted out: and puerile as it may appear, it is a case of no uncommon occurrence. I am persuaded that, if the inquirer will

take pains to examine the ground which he is treading, he will find a scriptural admonition meeting him at every step, and fitting the very disposition of mind which he then entertains. And it were well if, in the outset, he pondered the meaning of the Saviour's admonition, an admonition which strikes at a latent, but dangerous principle of the heart, "*Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me, and of my words, of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father, with the holy angels.*"

It is nothing to the purpose to say, that we should be willing to endure any public dishonour for the sake of Jesus Christ. There is a kind of heroism in this, which has its attractions. And it is more than possible that the very man who would give his body to be burned, rather than abjure Christianity, may be kept back far from salvation, by the petty consideration of shame: while it is equally certain, that thousands who now retire from the blessings of the gospel, dreading the first disclosure of their feelings, would be willing to enter, if they could, into a *confidential contract* with the Redeemer!

How important it is, my dear friend, to begin aright in any undertaking! And nowhere is it as much so as in the great concerns of the soul. An error here will follow us on, and may effectually preclude all discovery of the truth. There is an

ingenuousness and candour, for which the present state of your mind is well prepared, and the exercise of which will always furnish some relief. I have often thought there was something touching in your remark on an interview with W. "His appearance at that moment was like that of the angel to Hagar, as she sat in the wilderness mourning over her dying hope." And I do admit that, at such a season as this, we have our personal preferences of those to whom we would present the burden of our minds. Where there is good sense and piety in the object of our choice, the interview may be blessed. I see no necessary reason, as others profess to do, why such a choice should produce an undue leaning on human means: for we entertain, with little apprehension, our preferences in the ministrations of the word: and we are certainly bound to adopt those measures which most directly reach our wants, as well as to seek those instructions which most immediately meet the circumstances of our particular cases.

Yet, after all, it is rather a *principle* than a *practice*, to which I would direct your attention. Whether we express our difficulties to another, or adopt only those more direct means which are prescribed in the word of God, is of secondary importance, judicious as the former may be in most instances. But it is of primary importance to

know whether we are attempting to commence this great concern, with a subdued temper, or with fostered feelings of pride.

It is a question, which has more than once occurred to me when I have reflected on your inquiries, whether I shall congratulate my friend on his present state of mind, or how far I should sympathize with him in this new species of sorrow? But how could I do either alone? This is a most critical era in his life. It may look forward to the enjoyment of Heaven; or it may produce an issue as positive on the side of despair. Let us pause together for one moment, and examine the ground on which you are standing.

The prejudices which you once carefully guarded, and which seemed as a retreat when conscience approached too near — how they have dwindled away! The objections to evangelical truth, which possessed shape and magnitude, with the very appearance of solidity, have vanished as the light grew brighter around you. Difficulties which you thought deserving of serious investigation; and petty objections, which furnished an excuse for indifference to the whole matter of salvation, have receded without awaiting your scrutiny. Whence all this? It was no mere deduction of reason. You have arrived at a conclusion more irre-

sistible, and by a process more rapid, than that of argument. This is none other than the work of the Spirit, whatever its end may be. You are surrounded by a new and powerful exhibition of divine truth. You look far enough, perhaps, into the doctrines of the gospel, to see that they contain an energy, and a fulness of meaning, of which you thought little before. You discover more nearly, the worth of the Christian's hope. You feel, in some measure, as if awakening from a dream, to a sense of want and danger. How will you account for all this? "*It is God that worketh in you.*" You can look back with some surprise on the past, while you compare it with your present sense of conviction. The thoughtlessness of your associates darkens your prospect, by the contrast it furnishes; and you are half disposed to say,

I see a hand *you* cannot see:

I hear a voice *you* cannot hear.

There are moments, too, when you feel insulated in the midst of the world; all its joys and cares are merged in the vast consideration of your eternal fate; and your sensations seem as the shadow of Eternity thrown over your soul.

Now, whatever may be the degree of your

feelings, all this is an operation of divine power ; and—let me add—an effort of divine grace. But still it presents only part of the scene, in which an awakened soul is the active or passive object. There is much, which that soul does not see ; and much of which it may seldom think. Angels, who minister to the heirs of salvation, rejoice in the conversion of the sinner. Are angels, then, listless spectators of a scene whose result may gladden heaven ? Hell never loses a victim without a malignant effort to retain it. And are these lost spirits idle in such an hour ? Do not imagine that these are the mere suggestions of fancy. The value of an immortal soul is not too small to deserve this interest.

Nor is this all. There are two other considerations which attach importance to this state of mind, beyond that of any former period of life. The light which shines so clearly from the Law and the Gospel, not only aggravates the guilt of every sin committed in it, but renders every hour's delay more criminal in the sight of God. This is an awful truth, however little it may have occupied our thoughts. The sins of other hours, their neglects and follies, are committed under less restraint, and with less compunctions of conscience. Sad as is the record they bear against us, they are comparatively

small. But when the Spirit of God has flung his brightness around duty and sin, and rendered them both unequivocal in our sight; when we are feelingly sensible that we are arrested in a career of danger;—then, even the unchecked sin of *thought* has a power to blind the understanding, and to sear the conscience, beyond the *act* of iniquity, on another occasion!

The other consideration is this. Every trifle in your circumstances is likely to produce some positive effect upon your condition as an inquirer. At other times, the influence of little events may reach but a little way. But at this period, when the heart receives an impression from every thing that can reach it, when tendencies of good or evil supplant each other so easily, it is not impossible that the eternal doom of the soul may be suspended upon an apparently negative matter.

There are political moments, when the fate of an empire hangs on a trifle, and the welfare of its millions is to be secured or lost. It is so, too, in the struggle of an awakened sinner; when hope may be won or abandoned, even without the interference of a ruling passion. Here, then, I cannot omit saying, that there is no idea more erroneous than that which is sometimes held by the friends of one who has

been aroused to a sense of danger, and led to some seriousness of thought. I mean the idea that all is now well: and the awakened sinner is "in a good way:" as if piety had already commenced its reign in the bosom, or a credible assurance were given of its future influence.

And are all these things really so? Are you singled out from the rest of the world, and placed on a spot which is soon to witness a change of infinite magnitude, in your present and future being? Yes; and your own mind meets these realities as they approach. There are hours when you feel as if every thing depended upon an immediate decision; when the conflict is plainly perceptible within you: and you sometimes ask yourself, "What will the end be?" You testify to the truth of all this. You are to yourself a witness of the doubts, fears, hopes, and painful suspense, which agitate the bosom of one whose heart is contending with the Spirit of God. Other events may be of little value, even if they completely change your temporal condition. But all that is passing in this period of your history, will possess a mighty influence, and may give an unalterable tone to your future character.

I admit that there is something fearful in the reflection, that so much may depend upon

matters, which, at other times, produce a less alarming influence: or that there should be a critical period of life, in which our future destiny is likely to be fixed: or that a present unhappy decision may possibly be final. But it is not indispensably necessary to appeal to any special doctrine of Scripture, in order to substantiate this truth. Every one, who is acquainted with the human mind under the convictions of conscience, must have noticed the increased insensibility which succeeds a fruitless struggle; and the loss of moral power, after a violation of serious resolves. But this insensibility, and this loss, increase in a melancholy ratio, in the once awakened sinner, who returns to the world.

Nor is it an extraordinary case, when we find a man whose mind has been the field of this conflict, utterly unsusceptible of serious thought, under the most alarming providences: or even passing into the extreme of bitter practical hostility, against all that is evangelical. It is even possible for him, in the midst of all this, to review his steps; and to remember the very goal at which present help and future hope were abandoned together.

Such an instance occurs to my thoughts this moment; and I shall do you no wrong if I frequently attempt to illustrate my remarks by

examples taken from life. The one to which I now refer, was that of an acquaintance, in whom a disposition naturally volatile, and feelings always impetuous, rendered the struggle more visible and marked. His unrepressed anxiety, and his impassioned resolutions, were known to his friends around him, and they awakened a general solicitude in his favour. It was impossible to be indifferent to the spectacle. Hopes and fears occupied the hearts of a prayerful circle. Expectations were raised and baffled, again and again. There was something frightful in the operations of his mind, and in the earnestness of his manner. It almost reminded us of what we should have fancied in the days of evil possession. But, even from this, we gathered some encouragement, to hope that his change would be as marked as his convictions. The result appeared at last; and it might have been foretold, by observance of the workings of wavering thought, as if the light of divine truth, that had shone so full, was now dimly flickering. The world laid a less disputed claim to his affections than ever. The voice of prayer was hushed; and the concern of many gave way to indifference.

Let me digress for a moment to say, this is all we usually know of such a case. In the sight of the world, the person would stand just where he was before. Pious friends would sigh, and hope

for the best hereafter. But, in the meantime, a work is going on in his own bosom, part of which he may not understand; while another part plainly communicates a secret, ominous of the future; for there is ever something, in this condition of the once awakened sinner, which tells a forboding tale. That brief and thoughtless prayer, contrasted with the aroused energies, which so lately directed every petition to the throne of grace; that satisfaction when it is over, betokening the reluctance of the offering, and contrasted, in its turn, with the cry into which the whole soul had once been infused, “*God have mercy on me a sinner!*” that change of meaning and of character, which appears in the service of the sanctuary; that—what shall I call it?—that conscious and renewed deadness to all that is sacred or spiritual; that feeling of one’s own weight again, on returning to the world, until the world has taken part of the burden on itself; that half-desperate, half-hopeful, self communion with the soul; or that “dash of the die,” which indicates a spirit hazarding all, in almost conscious infatuation;—no matter what the sensations or signs may be, there is an obvious sense of a dealing between God and himself, in the breast of the apostate inquirer, on his first return to the world. And, although he take his rank among those around

him, only as one of the impenitent of the earth, he is not insensible himself, that his past experience has rendered his situation peculiar, and that it is possible to call a testimony against him, whenever events may awaken his conscience from its slumbers.

In the person to whom I have alluded, I question whether the light of conviction ever went out altogether. There was a witness within his own bosom which continued to prophesy, although it was clothed in sackcloth. But his cavils were frequent and many, whenever evangelical truth was named: and they were always mingled with that acrimony of expression, which displays the unsatisfied condition of the utterer; and which reminds us of the desperate state of a fallen combatant, who flings the dust at his antagonist, in the vexation of his spirit, before he bites it in the agonies of death.

The subject of these remarks would converse with all the eagerness of one who held an interest in the prosperity of the kingdom of darkness, on the uncharitableness of Christians, on the discrepancy of sects, or on the unhallowed example of professors of religion. How wide a field! And he seemed to have left behind him all his personal cares, whenever he traversed it. But why should I detail?—A voice arrested

the caviller. It was not that which confounded Saul on his way to the Christians of Damascus. It was that of death ; death, too, at a peculiar juncture in his temporal affairs. This, however, was of least importance. The crisis of an eternal fate he considered as past. But what of that? Survivors put the best construction on the remorse of the deceased. Besides, there is a natural disposition to identify remorse and evangelical repentance ; and there is something revolting to the minds of most of us, to scrutinize, with no more than a proper cautiousness, the evidences of conversion on the bed of extreme suffering. We are prone to reflect on what Almighty power *can* do, in an hour of extremity ; and we willingly take the possibility for a hope. Who, then, would not have looked for the best? It was what he called “these illusions,” which he endeavoured to dispel. “I have always believed,” said he, “that there was a horrible thought, in dating the possible departure of the Spirit of God from the soul. We shudder at the idea of desertion, without reflecting on its particulars. But it is tolerable while wrapt in the mystery of ignorance, ignorance of its manner, its cause, and its time. And yet, at this very hour, I can look back to the turning point of my hopes. I can remember my struggles

under conviction. I can recall the weariness of effort, the distaste, the compunctions, which preceded the first bold act of worldliness; and which, in their departure, declared the issue decisive. In all the confusion of my thoughts, here is an unchanging spot in the survey of the past. There it remains, and no hand can blot it out.—No, you are not to imagine my judgment impaired in such a review. I can deliberately retrace the seasons departed. My return to the world was not designated by an act which the common rules of morality would impeach. But it was by one, which, it is plain, put an end to the struggle; and I could not renew the conflict when I would willingly have done so. Conviction did not leave me. But it sat on my spirits like a lifeless weight, that instead of giving them activity, crushed them down. My judgment is as much convinced as ever: but it avails me nothing. The brightness of a holy law, and that of the world which I am approaching, only render my condition more awful; as the midnight lightning does that of the wrecked mariner, by showing him the impossibility of escape. I can see, I can comprehend; but I can lay hold of nothing. I can compel no play of that interest which the near approach of the Holy Spirit once created in my bosom.”

We will drop the curtain here ; for, in less than an hour, the sufferer knew more of Eternity than you or I.

Now, it is not necessary that exactly such an example should be adduced, in support of our position. It is still true, whatever be the nature of the feelings under conviction, that to realize the near interest in salvation which once gave energy to desire, and force to our resolution, will be far less easy, after the mind has been brought to a certain degree of closeness in the approach to spiritual things, and has retreated from them again. The degree of actual guilt, in the commission of sin, may have less to do with such an effect, than have a sense of warning gone by and the consciousness of past divine interposition. There is an agency between the sinner and his God ; and, however little the former may say on the subject, or however indistinct it may appear in the bustle of his thoughts, he will not be insensible to it, nor will he ever wholly forget it, in the remainder of his life.

Adieu, my dear sir, for the present. Remember what eyes are upon you. Remember what interests are at stake. Recollect that all your anxiety is known to ONE who can afford you relief ; and that every fluctuation of hope and fear is noted with an earnest concern for

your welfare. This single reflection carries with it both admonition and encouragement. Be much in prayer. Make the word of God your principal study. Maintain a vigilant guard over your thoughts; and avoid every engagement which might unnecessarily divert them from your present pursuit.

I am truly yours, &c.

LETTER II.

Too sanguine views.—Danger of reliance on present, though strong, feelings.—The duty of avoiding unnecessary association with men of the world. — Importance of duly estimating the great concern.—On the opposition and seductions of mistaken friends.—A melancholy instance.—The opposition of the irreligious should be regarded as an additional motive to diligence.—Prudential advice.—An instance of the happy effects of Christian prudence.—Discouragements from luke-warm professors of religion.—The folly of relinquishing the pursuit in consequence of external difficulties.—The great source of encouragement.

THAT ardour, and perhaps vehemence, of feeling, which exists in some inquirers, frequently precludes the calmer suggestions of the understanding. To one in such a state, no obstacle from the matters of the world appears of magnitude: no temptation seems worthy of thought. He believes himself fortified against all the seductions of common life. The great end of salvation he conceives to engage, not only the emotions of his heart, but the faculties of his mind. Without a single fear from external impressions, he is ready to encounter any tempt-

ation: and he thinks himself prepared to oppose the feelings of his present anxiety, to all that could be set in array against it. The allurements of time have disappeared. All that belongs to earth has sunk down into insignificance.

But is such a state always one of safety? May there not be danger in this overweening confidence? There is, certainly, imminent danger. The same susceptibility of temperament which exposed his bosom to its present agitation, lays it open to insidious encroachments from a quarter whence he apprehends but little danger; and the strong holds of his security are, generally, his most vulnerable points.

Nor is this a matter of surprise, when we recollect that there is no state of mind more deceptive, or more treacherous, than that which is produced by some kinds of serious impressions. The secession from the world is not always, as might be imagined, the effect of a love of holiness; and the disinclination to pleasures recently dear, does not arise from a positive taste for piety. There is no new principle planted in the heart; and the powerful feeling which is supposed to govern it, is without any rule of control, or any defined place of direction. The scenes of a single hour may produce a rapid and perceptible return of the former current.

Is there, then, any thing more unwise, or more hazardous, than a confident reliance on a condition so precarious, in the midst of temptations which present so strong an appeal to the natural heart? Yet it is to this that we are to attribute the failure of many an inquirer, whose earnestness had inspired us with lively hope of his success; but who, mistaking an unorganized feeling for a substantial principle, was taken in the snare which presumption had placed in his way. Then, perhaps, he is astonished that a state of mind which he considered as the dawn of religion, has passed off so easily, and all that is unspiritual has resumed its sway in his bosom.

If the remarks in my last letter have increased your apprehensions of temptation and danger, from the circumstances under which Providence has placed you, I trust there will be no reason to regret that they were written. There is, indeed, in all the states and relations of life, much that should excite a jealousy of ourselves: and it is well to discover its very secret and insidious operation upon our conduct, before that operation is carried to an exclusiveness of the great object which we are labouring to reach. Such an effect, my dear friend, is more than possible. We may exert our whole efforts to keep up a certain condition of feeling, yet without any direct or practical reference to its ultimate design. The evil of

this shall be the subject of a future page. At present, I have only to express my hope, that, while you entertain such serious fears lest your anxiety be diminished, and while you still feel “this unaccountable timidity” on the subject, you may be enabled *at once to cast yourself upon* HIM who understands all your infirmities, and who beholds with infinite tenderness even a single one of his creatures “in the gall of bitterness.”

That you should *abandon all unnecessary intimacies, which are unfavourable to your spiritual welfare*, is both the dictate of imperative duty and the prescription of ordinary policy. A judicious physician would always, if practicable, remove his patient from an infected district, and place him in an air more favourable to recovery. But the atmosphere of worldly associates is as inauspicious to spiritual life, as is the spot of infectious disease to the health of the human frame. The gaiety, or if it be only indifference to religion, which prevails in the society of worldly men, will not always give intensity, by the force of contrast, to the convictions of the awakened sinner. Its more probable effect will be the unsettling all that gave promise of future good. He ought to remember that the tone of his mind, unformed as it now is, subjects him to a more positive effect from the society in which he moves, than from causes which may be more suspected ;

and that he needs every possible check upon dispositions which are now restrained by a rein at the best but feeble.

“ I am a companion of all them that fear thee,”* said one of old, in evidence of his delight in the counsels and commandments of God. Such, too, should be the language of the sincere inquirer, when he confirms his resolution to unite himself for ever to the cause of the Redeemer; a resolution which he is likely to make before he has yet fully considered that he is to connect it with the discharge of *every* sacred duty. Probably he supposes that there are certain duties which can be accomplished only by the Christian, while there are others which it is in the power of the unrenewed man to complete: a common and pernicious distinction. But the simple truth is, and it demands the most serious consideration, that the unconverted man is under the same primary obligation as the Christian himself, to obey the whole law of God; that his line of duty extends to the full length, directly or remotely, of that which belongs to the subject of grace; and that all neglect or inability (which is demonstrably nothing but disinclination) is charged upon himself: by the same reason that the temper and disposition on the part of the sinner which are opposed to

* Psalm cxix. 63.

holiness are condemned as blameworthy and guilty.

Remember that a choice of associates is fully within your power ; or, at least, that a retirement from *unnecessary* intercourse with worldly men is perfectly practicable. It is equally certain that a disregard of precepts to this purpose, is in opposition to one of those petitions which should form a part of all our prayers, “Lead us not into temptation.” In the meantime, there is not a more deleterious effect to the mind of the man accustomed to the right use of devotional seasons, than that which he perceives when he comes to the chamber of retirement from the immediate influence of worldly society. And it not infrequently requires all the powers of a living principle of piety, to restore him to a devotional frame. If such be the experience of one whose principles and habits are confirmed, how much more important is the choice of society to the inquirer !

Much has been said on the trials which decision on this subject are supposed to produce ; and in some instances, with reason. But may it not be true that, in most cases, no small share of these evils is imaginary ; and a considerable part of the difficulties of our own formation ? I assure you that I have often thought so. There are few, in a land lighted by the gospel, who have not had their serious moments, not to say seasons of pain-

ful conviction, and whose judgments do not secretly approve the course of the returning sinner. Even he who professes to be satisfied with a cold system of morality, and who disavows a belief in the transforming influence of the Holy Spirit, is not always perfectly contented with the part which he has adopted. There is, I have no doubt, a latent feeling of insecurity, brought into action by the separation of a former companion; and he may feel the reproach which that separation tacitly conveys: but whatever deportment he may manifest, depend upon it, there is no decline of true respect towards that companion. Apprehensions on this subject are very frequently groundless; and the unhappiness which they create entirely gratuitous. And so, it might be added, are very many of the external cares which harass the awakened sinner.

That excuse for neglecting the concerns of the soul, which so often follows the solemn admonitions of conscience, and which assumes such a shape as the following, *I am afraid to begin the inquiry for salvation, lest I be tempted to abandon it at last*, is not without an operation here. There are those who are unwilling to forego society which they know to be prejudicial to their best interests, from a doubt of their future success in the inquiry, and a fear of the consequent shame on coming back to the world. And it is this which, by producing a

compromising spirit and conduct, effects the very failure which they apprehend. Such a man is attempting to secure two irreconcilable interests; or at least to retain one in the peradventure of ill success with the other. Here can be no sincerity of heart in the application for divine favour; no fair value set upon it; neither conviction of sin, nor a true disposition to surrender every thing unreservedly to God, and relinquish all that stands in the way of such a sacrifice: a disposition of which you should never lose sight, and to which I would have your mind habitually directed.

There is not a more important scriptural direction to the inquirer, than that which bids him “count the cost” of the pursuit in which he professes to engage. Any reserve which he may desire to make in the great obligations of duty will as effectually bar his success as an avowed spirit of worldliness. With language that seems designed to anticipate all such difficulties, the Saviour has expressly said, “If any man come to me, and hate not” (a *comparative* term) “his father and mother, and wife and children, and brethren and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple: and whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple.”*

Here the dearest earthly affections

* Luke xiv. 26, 27.

that we can entertain are considered as secondary in the heart of sincerity. The remainder of the chapter from which this passage is selected, let me add, deserves your most attentive consideration. *The awakened sinner has no right to form any calculations for the issue of his failure.* Nor should he, for a single moment, count on the possibility of such a result: for if this be the termination of his anxiety, the event is of his own accomplishment, and not that of God. He should be willing to withhold nothing; but of all that he has and is, to make a cordial and immediate surrender.

Let the inquirer continue in the practice of worldly association, and the instance will be an exception to a general rule, if he do not ultimately abandon his object; if a certain, not to say a rapid, change do not mark the transition of his feelings in a return to thoughtlessness again. The innocent cheerfulness, as he deems it, to which he is exposed, but which is here the levity of an inconsiderate mind, easily becomes an object of attraction: or the apparent amiableness of demeanour, which he beholds, inspires an unscriptural charity for those who exhibit it; a charity, which, on comparing his conduct with theirs, he very naturally annexes to his own condition: and all this, especially when the unrenewed heart so easily grows weary of its burden of sorrow, and

longs to deposit the load of its care on the first offered opportunity!

Let your companions, I pray you, be those whose conversation and whose aims are spiritual. Or if this be impracticable, confine yourself as much as possible to the society of Him whose eye you cannot escape, and who may be equally your friend, your counsellor, and your God.

It is indeed a melancholy truth, that, in the concerns of the soul, a man's enemies may sometimes be "those of his own household;" or of the very group with which he is daily and necessarily associated. Favoured indeed are they, whose family and friends are all of the household of Christ; and whose progress in holy attainments is forwarded by a pious intercourse! But such is not the lot of all. Strong, and sometimes effective opposition is made to the advancement of those who are less advantageously circumstanced. The air of seriousness is mistaken for an unwarrantable melancholy. The sedate deportment, and perhaps abstracted thoughtfulness, disturb the vivacity of the domestic circle; or even excite some alarm respecting the mind, or health, of the inquirer. Parental anxiety, or that of attached friends, suggests a thousand unhappy surmises; and measures are taken to arrest an event which affection itself is apprehending. Among these, are

those misconceptions of doctrine, those mistatements of the character of true religion, and those appeals to a religion of nature, which the natural heart is always prepared to furnish ; or those false ideas of the attributes of God, and that unscriptural advice, whose end is rather to hide than to heal “ the leprosy of the soul.” No where is the worldling so willing to advise on a subject which he does not understand *himself*, no where so willing to “ daub with untempered mortar,” as in the complaint of the corruptions of the heart. The convicted sinner, who has some fair insight into his own evil, detects the fallacy of this interference ; and while he knows that his disorder is misunderstood by those who, without being sensible of it, are perishing with the same disease, he can exclaim with a sigh, like one in distress before, “ Miserable comforters are ye all !” But where the view of his condition is more imperfect, and the wound has never been deep, the end of this interference may be fatal. Affection will inspire a strong confidence in those whom we love. A child is very apt to attach an equivocal character to the rules which a father may violate, rather than suspect the integrity of his parent. This very principle, not infrequently, gives an undue influence to the unscriptural and most injudicious counsel of friends ; and that, too, where the motive is not fully understood even by themselves.

It is a cruel kindness which would sacrifice the interests of the soul to a temporary pleasure; or hazard them all for the sake of its own selfishness. Yet we have reason to apprehend that another world will tell many a story of woe, touching this very point, in the history of souls!

“I was present,” said a worthy minister of the gospel, on an occasion which introduced this subject, “I was present where an instance of this kind made a painful and indelible impression on my memory. An accomplished and amiable young woman, in the town of——, had been deeply affected by a sense of her spiritual danger. She was the only child of a fond and affectionate parent. The deep depression which accompanied her discovery of guilt and depravity, awakened all the jealousies of the father. He dreaded the loss of that sprightliness and vivacity, which constituted the life of his domestic circle. He was startled by the answers which his questions elicited; while he foresaw, or thought he foresaw, an encroachment on the hitherto unbroken tranquility of a deceived heart. Efforts were made to remove the cause of disquietude: but they were such efforts as unsanctified wisdom directed. The Bible, at last—O how little may a parent know the far-reaching of the deed, when he snatches the Word of Life from the hand of a child!—the Bible, and other books of religion, were removed

from her possession; and their place was supplied by works of fiction. An excursion of pleasure was proposed, and declined. An offer of gayer amusement shared the same fate. Promises, remonstrances, and threatenings followed. But the father's infatuated perseverance at last brought compliance. Alas, how little may a parent be aware that he is decking his offspring with the fillets of death, and leading to the sacrifice, like a follower of Moloch! The end was accomplished. All thoughts of piety, and all concern for the immortal future, vanished together. But, O how, in less than a year, was the gaudy deception exploded! The fascinating and gay L—— M—— was prostrated by a fever that bade defiance to medical skill. The approach of death was unequivocal; and the countenance of every attendant fell, as if they had heard the flight of his arrow. I see, even now, that look directed to the father, by the dying martyr of folly. The glazing eye was dim in hopelessness; and yet there seemed a something in its expiring rays, that told reproof and tenderness and terror, in the same glance. And that voice—its tone was decided, but sepulchral still—‘My father! Last year I *would* have sought the Redeemer.—Fath—er—your child is’—Eternity heard the remainder of the sentence; for it was not uttered in time. The wretched survivor now saw before him the fruit of a disorder,

whose seeds had been sown when his delighted look followed the steps of his idol in the maze of a dance. O how often, when I have witnessed the earthly wisdom of a parent banishing the thoughts of eternity, have I dwelt on that expression which seemed the last reflection from a season of departed hope, 'Last year I would have sought the Redeemer !' "

But there are instances in which the opposition is of a more distinctive character ; and when, instead of arising from a fallacious regard to the temporal welfare of those concerned, it collects and concentrates the malignity of a heart inimical to divine grace. This may be observed sometimes in the very individuals who pay an outward respect to the ordinances of religion. The taunting sneer, or the lower but not less bitter, ribaldry, aims to transfix a spirit already fallen by another hand. For that temper of mind which, with conscious falsehood, applied to the Saviour epithets of ignominy and scorn, and then condemned him under the charge, is not less disposed to apply false terms to all that opposes its interests, and then to hold up the object of its slander to contumely and reproach. And should the sincere follower of Christ hope to live ever unassailed, when his Master was accused as an epicure, and executed as a traitor ?

There is one consideration here which should

not be forgotten. If the thoughtless opposer would assign the true motive of his repugnance, that opposition, instead of proving an impediment in the way of the inquirer, would form a strong ground of encouragement. He would see its source, in an ignorance alarming in the extreme; or in a selfishness which arrogates to itself a right to new-modify the gospel-plan; or in the disguised malice of a heart which partakes of the rancour of lost spirits! Believe me, this language is not too strong. The passions of a bosom unreconciled to God are never displayed under more plausible pretexts, or with more decided energy, than when they are called into action by an example of piety, warning the conscience while it enlightens; or by an instance of departure from worldliness, forming a gap in the circle of association that may more admonish of danger than the very instructions of the sanctuary. Yes; if the inquirer would ponder these truths, of which he may have the clearest conviction, every hand that opposes his progress would appear to beckon him on.

Religion is indeed the only sure basis of domestic peace. But whenever it comes in contact with a spirit of worldliness, or threatens to encroach upon its territory, we are to predict nothing less than the fulfilment of the Redeemer's prophecy—"For I am come to set a man at variance

against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.”*

To an affectionate bosom, it must be admitted, there is a peculiar painfulness in a situation which involves a contest between natural attachment and Christian principles, or convictions of duty. It is far more than possible that it has often thwarted the great purpose which appeared to have begun in the bosom. But to all this, my dear friend, may you be able to say, “None of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy.”† To you a voice has come, significant and earnest as that to one in former days: “Escape for thy life; look not behind thee, neither stay thou in all the plain.”‡

Yet in some instances of severe opposition, the fault may be, in a considerable measure, in the inquirer himself. His own conduct may provoke an array of hostility, where it would not otherwise have appeared. Let me then subjoin the following injunctions.

Avoid all that unnecessary appearance of gloom, which may be mistaken for austerity, or may give rise to a suspicion of rooted melancholy. The effort to exhibit an hilarity which you do not feel,

* Matthew x. 35.

† Acts xx. 24.

‡ Gen. xix. 17.

and which would be productive of mischief, in your present state of mind, even if unfelt, is certainly one extreme. But a cultivated dejection of countenance or air, is another extreme, which may be injurious to yourself, as well as to others. There are those who have been induced to form an artificial aspect of sorrow, by the hope that the artifice may sadden and depress their own feelings. This is nothing less than a species of hypocrisy. On the other hand, sedateness and sobriety of deportment will be perfectly compatible with that amenity of demeanour which society has a right to claim from us all. You owe much to the happiness of others around you : never, therefore, unnecessarily infringe it. But especially, you owe it to your God, to avoid subjecting his cause to an imputation which it does not deserve. It was an excellent answer, if understood within its proper limitations, which was given by a minister of state,* to one who rallied him on his seriousness in the midst of the festivities of a court : “ While we laugh, my friends, all things are *serious* around us. *God* is serious, who exercises such patience towards us ; *Christ* is serious, who shed his blood for us. The *Holy Ghost* is serious, who strives against the obstinacy of our hearts. The *Scriptures* are serious, in all that they say.

* Sir Francis Walsingham.

All that are in *heaven* and *hell* are serious. May *man* then trifle, whose doom is settling every moment?" Yet it was, perhaps, a still better reply given by one who had been reproached for his visible distress: "It is not *religion* that renders me sad, or that has ever rendered another sad; it is the *want* of religion which I mourn." A distinction which worldly friends are not apt to remember.

Again: If ever it become necessary to defend the views you have adopted as your own, and to which despondency is so often imputed, do so *with all that gentleness of spirit, which may win others, while it is a safeguard to yourself.* One of the most lovely effects of Christian prudence which I have ever known arose from the conduct of a young friend, whose temper was naturally irascible, and whose love of victory in argument was paramount in his bosom: but who, under distress for the fate of his soul, displayed a manner affectionate and patient, in opposition to numerous efforts to harass and discourage him. "Why," said his brother, after an ill-timed charge on his principles, "why are you not now as desirous of victory as in former times?" In a subdued tone, he replied, "The cause then was that of my own vanity: the present cause is Christ's: I was alone in the first: Omnipotence will take care of the

second." It may have been manner, or, if you please, it was the contrast between past and present feeling, so visible here, that produced so powerful an effect. Certain it is, the aggressor, without feeling himself *repelled*, was *disarmed*. His weapons were melted down; and his heart was melted with them. The brothers soon sustained a nearer relation to each other than ever, in the family of the Redeemer.

May we, my friend, always display less solicitude to fortify opinions of our own, however just they may be, than to extend the cause of Christ, by an example that shall be "a living epistle!" If there be a power on earth, of all others most adapted to disarm opposition to the truth of God, it is such a one as I have just presented to your sight; and such an example is likely to be visible in ourselves, in proportion as we study our own hearts, and look with intentness to the cross.

There is, sometimes, a species of negative opposition, if I may so call it, of which the Inquirer bitterly complains. I mean that of the apparent indifference of professors of religion to the state of his mind. Deepened anxiety may have supplanted any scruples of delicacy which had previously existed; he may have expected that sympathy which sorrow frequently claims; and, in his disappointment, he may imagine an utter

unconcern in his behalf. I have already referred to the possibility of such a disappointment. But let me now add, that even this is conducive to the benefit of the sincere penitent. If it lead him to exclaim, "No man careth for my soul!"—if it overwhelm him with a renewed feeling of hopelessness, it may, and it will, more effectually unite, and concentrate, the powers of his mind in "the Hope of Israel." When it is remembered how nominal is the profession of many who "have a name to live;" and how even the zeal of the Christian may decline; any such disappointment, painful as it is, can be no fair cause of discouragement. It is indeed melancholy to see that supineness, so much at variance with an active love of the Redeemer, in those from whom we should not have expected it; and at a time when it operates with such a repulsive power. But this has no necessary connexion with our own interests. A great matter is pending between God and our own souls; and nothing without should divert our attention a moment from it.

In concluding this Letter, I would observe that there is no inconsistency greater than that of relinquishing the pursuit of salvation, on account of any external circumstances which may be in the way. To suppose that we are ever at liberty to wait, until "a more convenient season"

shall present fewer difficulties, is to imagine ourselves in an anomalous condition, in which we are at liberty to stand apart from the invitations of the gospel; a condition in which enmity of heart to divine grace is legalized, the laws of God suspended, and their penalty withdrawn. The whole of this is implied, in the excuse which the sinner draws from the ordinary obstacles produced by his circumstances in life.

Never suffer yourself to pause for a single moment, to magnify obstacles that may be in your way. You can now form some affecting estimate of the value of the soul. Ask, then, of your own understanding, Can He who bids you to his mercy, frame for you a yoke so oppressive that you are obliged to decline it, even at the peril of the soul? Can He, whose holy word gives assurance to the sincere inquirer, that "as his days so shall his strength be," can *He* speak an invitation, well knowing that there are difficulties too serious to be within the possibility of removal? Is he capable of such mockery to the wants of a fallen creature? O, let us ever be careful that our suspicions do not impugn the honour and assail the majesty of Jehovah! Go freely to One who is able to take off the burden of your cares. Recollect that, whatever difficulties appear in your way, he who divided the waters of old can open a passage for you to the

heavenly Canaan. In every apprehension, remember, "there hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful who will not suffer you to be tempted above that you are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that you may be able to bear it."

I am truly yours, &c.

LETTER III.

Sincerity diminishes difficulties.—Those of little real importance generally the most discouraging.—Impatience of disappointed expectations.—A fallacious complaint.—Its causes.—The dread of increasing anxiety.—A most dangerous presumption.—Evils from natural buoyancy of feeling.—Difficulty from the doctrine of Election.—Inclination and despair aid each other.—False pleas;—"I am seeking,"—"I am waiting for a day of power,"—"I am waiting for God to do *his* part."

MY DEAR SIR,

SUFFER me to add a few words to some remarks in my last letter.

I will commence with a position which, to me, appears worthy of serious reflection; it is this; *The temptations to which the awakened sinner is exposed are inconsiderable and weak, IN PROPORTION to the sincerity and earnestness with which he sets out.* When his mind was entirely engrossed with wordliness, it seized with avidity on the most contemptible objections to evangelical truth; and the smallest of these might have been sufficient, at times, to satisfy an understanding vitiated by sensual habits, and a

taste repugnant to moral excellency. But when the remonstrances of the Holy Spirit are brought to bear, in some measure, on the mind and the conscience, such objections disappear, and perplexities of a different character arise in their place. The magnitude of these also will depend upon the same rule, whether they arise from the state of the inquirer's mind, or from the agency of his spiritual adversary. He who never pays a higher price for the soul than his victim demands, and who met the venality of a Judas with thirty pieces of silver, because he asked no more, uses the same economy of means, in the difficulties with which he would dishearten a sinner who is led to a partial seriousness. Have you not remarked how fully this position is exemplified among inquirers? Have you not observed that more persons abandon the pursuit of salvation, in consequence of petty obstructions, than on account of those which are in their real nature more formidable? And does it not prove that the true state of the difficulty is to be found in the affections or desires of the inquirer? I am persuaded it is so; and that those causes which discourage many, have little or no influence upon others.

Let us examine some of those evils to which a failure is so often to be attributed. We will

begin with one of the most common ; *The impatience arising from disappointed expectations.*

We will suppose the inquirer to be conversant with the general invitations of the gospel, sensible that his natural condition is not one of safety, and determined to relinquish it. He begins a change in some of his habits. He commences the practice of prayer ; he attends with regularity on all the public means of grace ; he takes up some religious works ; he frequently consults the Bible ; and he devotes a set part of his time to serious thought. Days, and perhaps weeks, pass by : but, so far as he can discover, he has not arrived a single step nearer his object. If any conclusion be drawn, it is that he is further off than ever. How is all this ? The simple truth is, that he has engaged in a course for which he has no cordial inclination. His taste is repugnant to the task which he has enjoined upon himself ; and instead of being altered, as he had hoped, by his new employment, his heart continues averse as ever. The novelty of experiment wearing off, every effort he makes increases the sensation of drudgery. There is no spring of action ; no powerful motive ; and nothing to give life to desire. The schemes which fancy had formed, and the prospects it had presented, like all other imaginary things, pass away : and he petulantly asks, “ Is this the fruit of my

labour? I have done all that God has directed me to do; but I have done it in vain. I see none of the divine power which I was taught to expect. It is useless to prosecute the attempt."

How different is all this from his first anticipations! The short suspense, and then the peace in prayer; the comfort which was to flow on to his soul as he advanced; the pleasure of communion with God, after he had shed a few tears, deemed as honourable to himself as they were to be effectual to the end of his pardon;—it was for these that he was looking.

O, there is as much that is visionary, in the conceptions of many, respecting this whole matter, as there is in the regions of romance; as much that is unreal and fictitious! And when the search for all this has failed, the sinner is disconcerted; a mortified feeling ensues; or a gradual and thoughtless relapse to matters more congenial; a thoroughly effective, though, alas! little painful, despair; and, at last, a settling down with the abandonment of all present expectations.

It is easy to decide that there had been no real anxiety here. But, then, what was the obstruction in the way of this inquirer? Why did not a course which is most commonly prescribed, as the ordinary means of grace, end more favourably? Why should all such pains and care be

unavailing? I will tell you. This man overlooked the whole genius and method of salvation. Neither faith nor repentance were presented to his mind, in their true nature and relations. The track which he was pursuing may indeed be called a part of the external means of grace; but he had *no heart* for the engagement in which he was occupied. It was altogether a work of mechanical effort. This is evident from the fact that he could have proceeded that distance, however short, without becoming better acquainted with himself; without discovering determinate inducements to surrender himself at once to the Saviour. But to any knowledge which he might have obtained of his state, he paid no attention. On the contrary, he sedulously avoided a near approach to the truth. Let me illustrate this, by a review of the circumstances as they occurred. He saw distinctly that his heart was not right, if he saw no more; for the formality of his whole conduct must have made this plain. He was enabled, too, to discover that his conceptions of divine truth were gross; that he had no just sense of sin; that there was an awful distance between himself and a reconciled God; and that the very feeling which occupied his bosom, on the failure of his hopes, betrayed a heart at variance with holiness.

If he saw no more, it was in his power to

ascertain, at least, all this. But he acted on no part of it. He would have overleaped all that was intermediate, between the first thought of religion and the evidences of a renewed soul. Evidences of another description, those of a latent depravity, he would not examine. With the same inattention he saw his natural helplessness. His growing distaste for the outward performances of devotion, when the novelty of his pursuit was past, and his sad heartlessness in them before, ought to have indicated more than they did, and to have taught him a practical lesson of infinite value. But if he learned, it was only to misapply. He still laboured for—he knew not what; while he gathered no new motives for earnestness, or for directing his investigation into his own heart. Where, then, was the fault? Did he not evade the conviction which might have brought him, as a penitent, to God? And, while conscience sometimes accused him of this, did he not retreat from the accusation, and secretly hope that some *peculiar* way would be found out for him; some distinguishing favour bestowed, which selfishness is ever ready to promise, even in the very rejection of the terms of the gospel? O, what hypocrisy of dealing may be seen flowing from the reasonings of a selfish heart! How much that lurks within him would he conceal from his own sight! And how much are all his

sacrifices, and the temper with which they are offered, like those of him who frowned on heaven, because heaven stood aloof from his self-complacent spirit! *

Let me repeat what I have already hinted, and I may have reason to apply it to other instances, that, in the case before us, the inquirer has no defined object in view. He is led to serious thought, but it is with no distinct purpose. He is in the condition of one who hears a vague report of personal alarm, without being able to conjecture its meaning, or its nature; desiring to anticipate the evil without knowing where to direct his energies. Yet even from *him*, this inquirer differs in one unhappy respect. Such a man would examine all that could throw light on the truth. He would meet intelligence half-way. Not so here. There is a want of that candour to himself, which even the law of self-preservation should suggest: and he continues brooding, with a half-affected sorrow, over an indefinite evil, perhaps uttering secret murmurs to himself, which tend as much to harass his mind as to alienate his soul still more from God. Has any one in this situation a right to complain of his failure? Has he not stood back from the accomplishment of his own end? The adage of one who under-

* Gen. iv. 5.

stood the human heart is too easily verified; "The foolishness of man perverteth his way, and his heart fretteth against the Lord."*

But we will imagine such a one to have advanced farther. We will suppose him to have seen enough to know that a more serious development awaits him; and that, if he continue his pursuit, he must encounter the spectacle of moral deformity which an unrenewed spirit always exhibits. From this he revolts. He sees enough to create an alarm, not on account of his danger merely, but on account of the pain which will accompany perseverance in his investigation. It is a *present* ill which he dreads. The terrors of eternity are removed still further off, while he is engrossed with these apprehensions. If he go on, he must suffer: and he has arrived at a point of reflection near enough to obtain some general idea what that suffering would be; and to see that the path to Calvary may be one of distress, that the call which invites him to Christ is one which *reminds him of wretchedness and guilt*, and that the act of obeying it must be one of *self-abasement*. To proceed, then, is, as it were, in search of sorrow. "If," says one in such a state, "if faith and repentance would come of themselves, or if conviction would bring, at once, that distress

* Prov. xix. 3.

which would as immediately procure the favour of Christ, I should be satisfied to encounter it. But to go on making painful discoveries, becoming the executioner of my peace,—it is requiring too much !”

Alas ! what risings and rebellions of heart ensue ! And the secret thought is, “ God *ought* to do more to help me !”

Now there are two reasons why this man gives up the important question before him. One of these, I have already said, is the *dread of present suffering* ; the natural disposition to postpone a day of distress. He had been instructed to approach the Saviour directly ; but no sooner had he seen a part of the path he was to have travelled, than he relinquished the design.

The second reason is found in a feeling common to this state of mind, and which may be expressed in the following language : “ I have certainly made some discovery into the state of my heart. I have arrived within a certain distance of my object. *I can reach this point again at pleasure.* It is some satisfaction to see what *I can* do. I am encouraged, therefore, to return to the world.”

A third cause may be found in that *buoyancy of feeling* which so easily rises, after a momentary depression, higher than ever : that temper, which, unless grief give it sobriety, it is difficult to arrest long enough to effect any important purpose. In

such an instance, serious impressions come and go at the call of a trifle. But they come as the light cloud, which flings a shadow over the gaieties of the heart: and the little circumstance of external temptation, united, as it always is, with the reluctance of an unsanctified heart to the scheme of sovereign grace, displaces them again. The remembrance of a favourite amusement, so unlike the present unwelcome sobriety, disheartens and discourages: and even the thought of a frivolous jest whets the appetite again for worldly amusements. This is a lamentable state, in which the hopes of an immortal soul remain at the mercy of a petty incident. But the consideration of that very truth ought to furnish an inducement to more substantial resolutions, and to create a more effectual alarm of danger.

Unhappily, this is not always the effect. The mind of such a man easily deceives him. After having once abandoned the pursuit, he may return to it again with more earnestness; and with some additional hope from his former experience. He may do so again and again; for such a mind is liable to frequent awakenings: but we may see him, in every instance, deciding against himself, with the plea of the utter impossibility of success. Yet are they not *acquired* habits of which he is complaining, or on which he charges all his difficulty?—habits, which, if they stand in the way of

his spiritual welfare, are equally sinful and dangerous; and which are as certainly preparing their harvest of future remorse, as those more positive and flagrant? It is indeed a hapless spectacle which the inquirer here displays; when, like the idolatrous Jew, in whom the strength of habitual sin was too great for his convictions, he exclaims, "There is no hope: no; I have loved idols, and after them *will* I go!" But, if he took pains to examine the feelings with which this plaint is uttered, his conclusion would be more unhappy than he now suffers it to be. Let us look at it, in passing; for its frequency, in one form or other, renders it worthy of notice.

There are two principles here which afford each other mutual strength, *inclination* and *despair*: inclination to return to the world brings a plea from despair of success in the endeavour to leave it; and, in return, this despair of success encourages the inclination. It is the apology for vice which we may hear every day. "My habits," says the drunkard, "are too strong to be broken." "My passions," says the sensualist, "are too powerful to be withstood." "My love of frivolity," says another, "is too firmly fixed to be shaken." I know there may be a sadness of heart with which such an apology is uttered: but then it is counterbalanced by a secret pleasure in

returning to more congenial engagements, in which it is soon lost or forgotten.

Now to such a person I appeal, whether this be not the very feeling of mind with which he abandons his presumed inquiry for salvation? And, while he will find little reason for hesitating in his reply, he may see a most powerful motive to awaken him to a more permanent sense of danger, in a consciousness that it is *the love of sin* which holds him back from embracing the gospel. It is ignorance of this truth, or indifference to it, which suffers him to pass so easily again to listlessness and folly.

There is another difficulty, which deserves some consideration; both because it is a misrepresentation of an important doctrine, and because it affords to many what is considered a plausible pretext for secret despair or presumptuous neglect. I mean a difficulty originating in a *misconstruction of the doctrine of election*. This is not only a stumbling block in the way of the inquirer, but it is a frequent excuse in the mouths of the careless. The complaints of the two kinds of persons are substantially the same, though they may differ in form. The latter is expressed somewhat as follows: "If I am elected, I shall be saved: if not, it is useless to apply for salvation." The former affirms, that an effort has been made:

and an unfavourable conclusion is drawn from its failure. “ I *have* tried ; but in vain. I see I am not elected, and therefore I dismiss the subject,”

Is it not strange that men who, in other concerns, are not deficient in good sense, should make the secret counsels of God a rule for their own action ? That they should profess to be governed by a law of which they are confessedly ignorant ? That they should discard, in their spiritual affairs, the simple process of reasoning which they adopt in the common things of life ? Or shall we account for all this, by affirming that the caviller neither means nor believes what he says ? And that the inquirer intends only to avow the weariness of his pursuit ? We have great reason to believe that this is indeed the case. And if it be so, what wickedness does not this trifling evince ! What horrible impiety, in uttering a known falsehood under circumstances rendered so solemn by the loud calls of the Holy Spirit !

To either objector, the following remarks and questions may be worthy of attention. You cannot but feel and know, that you have the choice of holiness or sin ? You are certainly conscious that you lie under no restraint from good, or compulsion to evil ? You are at liberty, so far as your own agency is concerned, to adopt the line of conduct to which you are really and sincerely

inclined, whether it be worldly or spiritual. Experience and scripture coincide in the proof of this position. The freedom of the will is not a matter in dispute. But if your difficulties on the subject of predestination were consistent, you would reason thus: "I am fore-ordained to the commission of good or evil; I know not which: but until I can ascertain this, I will make no choice of either." And the consequence would, at least, be an honest effort to avoid iniquity. Now no such reasoning, or effort, ensues. You continue in the way of the transgressor: and in doing so, you shew which you prefer; you are deliberately choosing and fixing your own destiny. Is your complaint, then, any thing less than a cover of hypocrisy; a cloak thrown over the criminal resolutions of a depraved and treacherous heart?

Again: you cannot find any decree which forbids your acting righteously, or that can extinguish a desire of salvation in your bosom. What, then, has this doctrine to do in the question before you? All the invitations of the gospel are distinct from it; they are never given with a design that we should pry into the secret counsels of God, in order to discover their application to us; and those counsels can never contradict them.

Take the following case. A ruler offers pardon to certain rebellious subjects, on condition

that they lay down their arms. Some of them comply, and are pardoned. One refuses, and thus he gives his reason: "I am not among the number whom the Sovereign designed to save, and it is therefore useless to accept the terms of forgiveness." Now would you not say of this man, that he falsifies the assertions of the gracious ruler, and multiplies his own guilt? But the offers of our Divine Sovereign are not less explicit; and the conduct of the rejecting sinner is not less flagrant.

Why do you conclude with such certainty, that you are not among the elect? Has any one revealed this awful truth? If not, your conclusion has no higher origin than *conjecture*. And what is this, but a criminal intermeddling, or a profane trifling, with things that belong only to God? If such a conjecture detains you from the love of Jesus Christ, is it not criminal? Are you not destroying your soul with weapons of your own fabrication?

The Holy Scriptures, as well as the economy of the divine government, abundantly prove that non-election can never be the ground of condemnation. God will judge us by our own works, and not by his secret decrees. The doom of the lost will be, because they "love darkness rather than light," because they prefer iniquity to holiness.

In a practical sense, at least, the following expostulation, which Milton puts into the mouth of the Creator, is applicable here :

—— Nor can justly accuse
Their Maker, or their making, or their fate:
As if predestination overruled
Their will, dispos'd by absolute decree
Or high foreknowledge. They themselves decreed
Their own revolt, not I. If I foreknew,
Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault ;
Which had no less prov'd certain, unforeknown.
So, without least impulse or shadow of fate,
Or ought by me immutable foreseen,
They trespass, authors to themselves, in all
Both what they judge and what they choose.

Can it be true, that, “ whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved,” and that God “ commandeth all men every where to repent,” and yet that he secretly means to reject the prayer of the penitent ? If it be so, then you have a singular ground of security ; for the condemnation is, that the sinner wilfully refuses the offer of salvation ; whereas no such offer was made to you ; or, it was not in your power to accept it. Are you prepared to take this plea to the judgment seat ? Will you not shudder at so bold a presumption, at an appeal so daring ?

In any such instance as this, it should be remembered, that there cannot be a serious sense of danger, a deep conviction of sin, or any sincere

desire to be saved in the way which the gospel prescribes. All declarations to the contrary are either a vain pretence, or they arise from a most culpable ignorance of the individual's own heart. This is plain from the truth of a remark already made, that *the speciousness of a difficulty is a test of the sincerity of the inquirer*. The man who is sincere will endeavour to look directly to the object of his wants. He will be aware that he has not time, and he will not possess inclination, to occupy his mind with matters unrevealed. Or, if a suspicion of this nature flash before him, it will lead to a more diligent search after the truth; and it will end in a better knowledge of his condition, as a sinner. But, contrary to this, there is here an important and most dangerous defect, which, while it darkens the prospects of the soul, aggravates the doom which is likely to follow. The truth of this position will be manifest, if we consider the following statement.

A failure in the attempt to lay hold of the hope of salvation, implies a fault somewhere; either on the part of the inquirer, or on that of his God. But the inquirer exculpates himself, and declares, that he “*has done all in his power*; that his desires have been serious.” The fault, then, is charged upon the HEAD OF THE UNIVERSE! Is there not something horrible in this? Is not the disposition which dares undertake it, proudly

rebellious, and wholly unfit for the reception of favour? I do not mean merely undeserving, but in a state *unsuited* to the operations of mercy. And does not this very failure disclose its own cause, by bringing into play so unhallowed, so selfish, and so petulant a temper? A temper that would

Snatch from His hand the balance and the rod ;
Rejudge his justice, be the god of God.

If he who thinks himself refused, would pause a moment, and ponder the effect which that supposed refusal has produced, he might discover the reason : a discovery which might be of infinite importance to his spiritual interest, and be, perhaps, the means of securing his end. The first step to truth is the removal of error : and this ill success of the sinner might have shewn him some essential error, if he examined its results in the depth of his own bosom. In consequence of this, he would be nearer his object, and not further from it ; nearer, because he would see, more distinctly, both his danger and his wants.

I have said that inclination and despair, in certain states of mind, assist each other in the ruin of the soul. But what an awful state of heart should we sometimes see, if we could read the secret feelings of the once promising inquirer, *when he abandons the hope before him!* We should behold, not the penetrating sorrow which

tells the disappointment of a sad heart, and indicates its sincerity; but a latent *satisfaction*, the high evidence of his hypocrisy. Hear the murmurer, in the pride of self-complacency: "The fault is not mine; I have no censure to attach to myself!" Let us ask him, if there be not a self-gratulation on his return to worldliness and to folly? O, what a mockery of the character and attributes of God! What a challenge to that wrath which bold impiety draws upon itself! Ah, what have availed his resolutions or his prayers? A little delay has shewn him that his conduct has been governed by false pretences; and that, instead of being ready to love the Redeemer, he was prepared to arraign his rectitude and truth!

But an *avowed* abandonment is not universal, even among those who appear to have lost interest in the subject. We hear some stating their determination to continue their inquiry—"I am seeking." Few expressions are more illusive than this. It may be honestly uttered, but it very frequently is not so. It is one of those instances of perverting scripture-language, which a common mistake has sanctioned: a mistake to which I shall advert hereafter. At present, I would say to such a one; Your interest in religion diminished in the failure of your expectations: you were unwilling to admit to yourself that you were relinquishing

all hope, for this would have been a painful thought. You were determined to continue in the same round of duties, although they were discharged with insensibility and heartlessness. This course you considered as a kind of neutral agency; in which, if there were no comfort, there could be no danger. Here, too, you hoped that some light might gradually break in upon you: and you profess to "*wait patiently*," because it is the direction of the word of God. But can this dealing be approved by Him? Will a heartless round of form and shew lead you to that grace which you profess to be seeking? Does not this very contentment, while you are without spiritual peace, tell against you? You are *seeking*? Then it is for an object which you undervalue, and which excites no feeling of anxiety. There is danger in your present situation, and that most imminent. It is *not* neutral ground on which you are standing. Every hour in which you remain out of Christ, you are increasing your guilt, and diminishing your hope of pardon. The pretext with which you would satisfy your conscience, is one which favours the natural inclinations of the heart. And how frequent are the instances in which a death-like lethargy supervenes! All the little sensibility that had existed, perceptibly giving way to a conscious stupidity: the form of piety

adopted, in the place of its principle: and the reluctance to confess a return to the world, gradually lost in its cares and its pleasures!

In such an instance as this, in which the pursuit, so called, may have continued for a long time, the most common result is that of *embracing some doctrinal error*. The nature of evangelical religion is questioned; so is that of change of heart: or the latter is discredited altogether; and the self-satisfying reasoning is, "I may have been mistaken in my expectations. My anxiety has left me; but my present peace may be the answer of prayer: and although I cannot perceive any difference between my present state, and that of some months before, excepting that habit has reconciled me more to outward forms, may I not be safe?" How readily is stupidity mistaken for a heavenly peace, after remaining in such a condition as this! And now, how completely is the soul invested in an armour which no arrow of conviction can penetrate!

Or, where this is not exactly the state of mind in which a long continuance of fruitless form has left the Inquirer, another plea is sometimes advanced, nearly as delusive and dangerous as the last. It is this; "*I am waiting for a day of power*. I have seen that power displayed in the conversion of others. I continue in the way of

it. I remain at the pool until the troubling of the waters."

Nothing is more easy than to deceive a mind in the situation in which we have supposed this to be. Exhausted by its own vain exertions, wearied, and *watching for some mystical effect*; the most foolish pretexts will bring on a relapse into indolence and inactivity. The reflections which serve to direct the attention from all possibility of danger, might frequently be read in such language as the following: "God must surely eye me with favour, while I am waiting in patience for his will. And if he do not now grant me the object of my prayer, he will see the virtue of this patience, and remember me in his own good season." Do you not see how much that is pharisaical pervades all this; how much of an unhumiliated and legal temper; and what erroneous conceptions of the true state of the heart? Do you not see how carelessness and indifference are misnamed? How the sinner arrogates to himself a Christian virtue which is inseparable from faith in Jesus Christ, and builds upon it the expectation of divine favour?

The prevalent mistake which is founded on the scriptural expression, "a day of power," betokens a gross ignorance of the scheme of redemption. It supposes a particular period assigned by eternal counsel, in which alone the Holy Spirit is

willing to work in the heart of the sinner ; that period independent of any state of mind in which the sinner may be ; and that until then, all desire or prayer must be unavailing. I need not detain you by an explanation of this error, in its source, and in its bearings. A single remark on a misconstrued phraseology will be sufficient. All the time of the Saviour's administration in what is called his exalted state, in contra-distinction from what is called his " day of humiliation," is denominated his " day of power." The time at which the sinner first believed, may be considered as that in which divine power renewed his heart. Yet it is said to every sinner, "*Now* is the accepted time, *now* is the day of salvation." Be assured, then, that if he be anticipating some imaginary period, in which God is more willing to accept him through Jesus Christ, he has embraced an error, which, the longer he holds it, will the more widen the distance between him and the Saviour. *God demands the whole heart this very moment ;* and every instant, during which it is detained from him, sends up an additional report against the delinquent.

To all this class of self-excusing, I would apply the remark of one, who, on a bed of illness, being asked, " if he was waiting God's pleasure," answered, " waiting implies *being ready*." There is pointed truth in this. He who only *professes*

to be waiting, depend upon it, *is not ready*. There may be very little difference between his state of mind and that of him who stands aloof from salvation with an apology which, if it do not indicate contemptuousness, argues a most sinful indifference, “I hope *my* time will one day come.”

There is another expression, corresponding with those I have already mentioned, and equally common: “I have done all that I was directed to do; I now remain until God shall do *his* part.” If the utterer would take pains to examine the feelings with which this is said, he would see that they are liable to the same severe charge which we have applied to other excuses; ignorance that is wilful, petulance, or a temporizing policy. It is of little importance which of these, while their tendency is to keep the sinner beyond the hope of salvation. Could it ever be said of any suppliant, “You have done all that was demanded at your hands, and yet God has resolved to withhold his promised blessing?” May we ever, with impunity, impeach his veracity?

Much of the language which I have thus quoted, composes a part of that *cant* phraseology (if the term be permitted) so general in partial religious impressions. It is always founded on error: and it is either the cause or the effect of greater repugnance to the doctrines of the cross.

It is indeed surprising what caprices and what follies, in the heart of the sinner, are brought to light, in the condition which I am describing: what inconsistent notions! what absurd expectations! what impertinences! what perverse ideas of God! what wanton impeachment of his holy character! And has such a man a claim upon the spiritual mercies of his Maker?—the very thing which he fancies to be his!—And is God under an obligation to hear him?—the very thing he imagines him to be!

Adieu, my dear sir. Dare to examine the dispositions of your mind. Tender it to the scrutiny of an Omniscient Being. Pray, and act consistently with such a prayer, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts; and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”*

I am yours, &c.

* Psalm cxxxix. 23, 24.

LETTER IV.

Common misconceptions.—Mistaken idea of a propriety in delay.—Any delay or suffering, the fault of the sinner.—Mistake relating to the necessity of a certain preparatory process.—Scripture examples.—Errors relating to the duty and acceptance of prayer.—“I am not yet prepared.”—“I am not holy enough.”—The inconsistency of such complaints.—Apprehended insensibility.—Analogies and illustrations.—Want of more clear views of sin.—Exact degrees of conviction not necessary, nor even possible, to be observed.—Why conviction is more difficult to be effected in a man of strict morality.—The gospel invites, without reference to the degree of conviction, upon the ground of universal and most urgent necessity.

MY DEAR SIR,

IF a heathen, who did not well understand the first principles of the gospel, were awakened to some sense of his guilt, we might expect him to cry out, “What shall I do to be saved?” But, suppose a man, whose home is in Christendom, and who has been imbued with a theoretical knowledge of the truths of Christianity, yet is ignorant of its power in his own experience; suppose him, for the first time, to make the fearful discovery of his lost condition, and of the neces-

sity of personal reconciliation to his God ;— would you not imagine the question wholly unnecessary on his part? Would you not say, that to him the path of the convicted soul would be plain, plain as a path in which “the way-faring men, though fools, *need* not err?” Would you not believe, that nothing could stand in his way, to obstruct a direct approach to the Author of salvation? Yes; judging from common analogy, you could hardly doubt that a mind, thus instructed, would know how to advance immediately to the mercy-seat. You would look for neither turnings nor windings, in a question that appears to carry its solution with it. See how we mistake! The plan that was so easy becomes intricate, the moment it is applied to affairs of our own! The very rules we should have laid down for others, and in which we should have had every confidence in relation to *them*, we are unable to reduce to practice for *ourselves*.

How shall we account for this? Does conviction darken the understanding? Or does it enfeeble our abilities? Or why, otherwise, should we not appropriate to our own use what we should have prescribed to others, in similar circumstances?

This is not the place to solve these difficulties, though it might not be hard to do so. The truth, however, is as we have represented it; that, com-

petent as one thus instructed might believe himself, to teach others in a matter in which he has had no personal experience, he finds his ability sadly diminished when the case becomes his own. Instead of proceeding, without waiting for intermediate measures, directly to the Redeemer, we see him, from the first moment of anxiety, enveloped in perplexities of which he had not thought, and which he would have declared entirely extraneous from a sincere inquiry. He may even linger long in this embarrassment, equally unhappy and sinful as it is.

The awakened sinner, who has been accustomed to the sight of others in a similar state of mind, is too apt to form conclusions from what he has thus seen or heard ; and to consider exactly the same experience indispensable for himself. He knew that such a one was the prey of distress, during a given space of time ; that such and such was the conflict he sustained ; and that, at last, the Redeemer pitied his sufferings, and granted an answer to his prayer. Now this whole representation is incorrect ; and not only so, but if the premises were just, the conclusion is fallacious. All that he heard or saw, gave him no fair insight into the truth. The simple fact here, and in every one of those cases which are presented in such a form as to lead to the inference that God is keeping the sinner at a distance, as if to make

experiments on his feelings and disposition, is as follows. All delay arose from misconception of the truth as it is in the gospel, from unwillingness to relinquish cherished sins, or from an unhallowed attempt to treat with the Creator on compromising terms. But never does delay arise from any cause that is contradictory to the idea of freely tendered pardon; or which does not prove and enhance the guilt of the sinner. It might be added, that all the pity which is so often expressed for the sufferer by those around him, is usually misapplied. This sympathy, which wears so amiable an aspect, may not infrequently be in behalf of a struggle, the *principle* of which is discreditable to its subject; and in behalf of sorrows which have their origin in enmity to God. I know there is an apparent sternness in this opinion: but it is inseparable from the scriptural position—that *all the fault of the sinner's delay is, exclusively, in himself.*

Contrary to this is that sentiment, so generally entertained, relative to the necessity of a *certain preparatory process*, which the sinner, it is supposed, must undergo previously to his acceptance by a pardoning God. Hence we hear of necessary stages in the course of inquiry; unavoidable goals, which are to be successively reached. Now all this arises from transplanting the impediments and mistakes which had been in the way

of one inquirer to that of another: or from supposing that we are to make provision for mistakes, which are thus considered almost justifiable because they are common: or still worse, it supposes the errors and their corrections, in one man indispensable in another. Hence arise those multifarious directions which are sometimes given to the inquirer, as if he were under an absolute necessity of doing, or suffering, to a certain amount: hence those speculations on the precedence of the operation of certain feelings and graces: hence many of those abstruser questions which have been connected with the subject, and which belong rather to the philosophy of the human mind than to the revealed doctrines of our blessed Saviour. O how vain, and worse than vain, is the attempt to reach those secret springs, which move the spirit of man by divine command to the activity of a new life! Truly absurd it is, to chalk out a certain course of particular emotions or cares for every inquirer. Adopt it rather as a fundamental point of belief, as one that is emphatic and of practical value, that whatever the situation in which the Holy Spirit may find the sinner, with respect to either external circumstances or the state of his heart, **THAT** is the situation in which he is bound to surrender himself *at once* to his God. The correctness of this is plain, from the very design of dispensing

mercy ; which is, not to bring to light any thing acceptable in the creature, for he has nothing that is so, but to reveal the perfections of God in the gift of pardon even to the most vile, through his Son Jesus Christ. Whatsoever the inquirer may have been taught, or may do, which is not in conformity with this design, is against his own interest and the honour of his God and Saviour.

Let us attend to the apostolic example on this subject. When the preaching of Peter, on the day of Pentecost, awakened thousands to a sense of their guilt, he did not wait for any interval to complete a preparatory process ; but directed their attention immediately to Him whom they had crucified.* Afterwards, when the same apostle charged others of that infatuated people with the murder of the Messiah, without delaying to ascertain the effect of this accusation on their minds, he bids them repent ; and, in the same breath, proclaims the hope of pardon.† Such too was the course adopted by the apostle Paul, in Antioch.‡ These inspired men certainly knew well, that a direction to any intermediate experience between the knowledge of the truth and its acceptance would have kept the sinner in an unnecessary suspense, and would have seemed to attach an uncertainty to the scheme of the gospel.

* Acts iii. 12—26.

† Ib. iv. 11, 12.

‡ Ib. xiii. 24—41.

In full consistency with this, the design of the Saviour may be discovered from some of his own instructions. Let us take the example of the prodigal son. I know that the interpretation of this parable is generally supposed to refer to the Jews and Gentiles, the former being the elder, and the latter the younger son; and that, therefore, since it relates to the external kingdom of Christ, it cannot apply to individual experience, except as divines say, “by way of accommodation.” The *moral* which is drawn from it in this interpretation is, I have no doubt, consistent with the truth; but not with the design which our Lord seems to have had before him. The whole context refers to the murmuring of the Pharisees, because publicans and sinners were admitted into association with Christ. It is, therefore, literally a repenting and returning sinner that is represented by the prodigal son. In this beautiful parable, the penitent child “comes to himself.” Unsatisfied wants, and the danger of starvation, stare him in the face. He now has the deep feeling of a truth, which his judgment might have told him before. And what is the consequence? Does he linger? Does he wait to make himself better fitted to receive compassion? No: the truth of his own sad condition and the ability of his parent to relieve him from it, come home together to his bosom: and his determination is, “I will arise!”

—to do what? To carry apologies to his father? No: but to say, “I have sinned!” The most interesting point, however, is that which follows. His father saw him “a great way off;” and with all the eagerness of parental affection, hastens to meet him. The consciousness of the sinner, that he is “a great way off,” gives no reason why he should stay at the fearful distance, or why he may not be met by a merciful Saviour. The case certainly supposes the sorrow of the penitent, and that for sin committed against an affectionate parent: yet is it of practical application to the awakened sinner, at the very first moment of undissembled anxiety.

But, lest any doubt should remain in your mind, whether something meritorious, or of self-made preparation, should not be accomplished by the inquirer, previously to his approach to the cross, I would go even further, and say, that if no uneasiness had been created in the bosom, and if he had been only this instant warned of his iniquity, and admonished to repent without delay, such an admonition ought not to be separated from the certainty of pardon to the soul which is willing to receive it in God’s own way.

Take another scriptural example. An unprincipled man is rebuked by one of the apostles, with a spirit and power which awed and con-

founded him. The culprit had committed a crime, which to this day bears his name. But the pungency of reproof was not permitted to go by itself. He was commanded to repent, and "pray to God" for forgiveness.* Now, such an instruction as this was sending this wicked man to the Redeemer. It was sending him immediately to seek pardon, from the very one whom he had offended. It is clearly taken for certain, that no obstacle was supposed in his way, except that of *moral* inability; the *want of will*. No extraordinary task was proposed. Every moment of delay, under any pretence, was increasing his guilt and danger. How exceedingly out of place, then, would have been any of those questions, which are often agitated on this subject? As, whether such a person be capable of prayer? Or whether, with a mind so estranged from God, the attempting such an exercise would not have been mockery? Let it be remembered that this direction was given by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit himself.

I am aware that, from the scriptural truth, "the prayers of the wicked are an abomination to the Lord," it has been argued, that an un-renewed man ought not to attempt such an act; and that, if he do so, it must be unacceptable to

* Acts viii. 22.

his Maker. The alarmed sinner also, of himself, will sometimes dread the danger of adding to his past sinfulness, by calling upon his pure and holy Creator. Yet it is certain, that the advice which commends him at once to Jesus Christ as his only hope, is a direction to prayer. It is indeed perfectly true, that the natural heart is far from being an object of complacency with God. Nor is it less true, that much of the distress which the awakened sinner encounters, and much of his mortified feeling under serious impressions, arise from a rebellious disposition, the obstinacy of unbelief. Beyond a doubt, so far as these exist, he is under the just frown of his God: and the sympathy which a pious bosom would entertain for him, would be no other than that which it would manifest towards the infatuated devotee of sin, who continues in crime while he is reaping its fruits of sorrow. But, on the other hand, the earnest desire for salvation from ruin, implanted as it is by nature, and aroused as it is under conviction, is surely not offensive to our Maker. And so far as this alone is concerned, the distressed soul is truly an object of pity both to the christian and to his God.

A quotation from a late learned divine occurs to me, as of so much importance, on this part of our subject, as to merit transcription.

“The prayers of convinced sinners, it is said, are insincere, and therefore abominable to God. In answer to this objection, I observe, that a sinner, whether convinced or not, may undoubtedly pray with insincerity, in all instances; but there is no invincible necessity, that his prayers should always be insincere, notwithstanding he is a sinner. A sinner may, from a sense of his danger and misery, pray as sincerely to be saved from that danger and misery as a saint. His disposition, I acknowledge, is still sinful; and his prayers are wholly destitute of moral goodness. But the mere wish, *to be saved from suffering*, is neither sinful nor holy. On the contrary, it is merely the instinctive desire of every percipient being; without which he would cease to be a percipient being. That there is any thing hateful to God in this wish, whether expressed in prayer or not, I cannot perceive; nor do I find it declared either by reason or revelation. It may indeed be united with other desires, and those either virtuous or sinful; according to the prevailing character of the mind in which it exists; and the whole state of the mind may be accordingly denominated, either virtuous or sinful. Still, this desire is neither morally good nor morally evil; and therefore, neither pleasing nor displeasing, as such, in the sight of God.

“That God pities sinners as mere sufferers, will not be doubted: otherwise he would not have sent his Son to redeem them from sin and misery. That he pities them more, when strongly affected with a sense of their guilt and misery, than when at ease in both, will, I think, be readily believed. The sinner is certainly not less an object of compassion, but much more, when feeling the evils in which he is involved; and I can see no reason why he may not be an object of divine compassion on that account, as well as of ours. The cries of the sinner for mercy are not, therefore, in themselves sinful; and there is nothing to make the sinner less, but much apparently to make him more, an object of pity.”*

To this it may be added, that the prayers of Cain, of the children of Israel, of the Ninevites, and of other unregenerate men, have been answered. The doctrine, then, which enjoins an immediate approach to the great Hearer of prayer, or, in other words, requires our *coming to Jesus Christ immediately*, is equally consistent with both reason and the word of God.

I cannot doubt that the Inquirer may be, in a certain sense, truly sincere, while he hangs back in expectation of a kind of mental dis-

* Dr. Dwight's System of Theology: Sermon 76.

cipline ; a routine which he does not understand, but which he has been taught to anticipate. Hence his common reply to the repeated solicitations of the gospel is, "*I am not prepared.*" But he has conceived wrong notions of the scheme of redemption. He has adopted some ideas which obscure its light, or embarrass its simplicity with perplexities which ought to have no connexion with it. How strange a posture of affairs is this, which is imagined to be his ! The inquirer is willing : so is God. The inquirer is waiting for the Redeemer, and the Redeemer waiting for him ! How inconsistent with the design of the bible ! How derogatory from the character of the Saviour !

There is another expression, which, though not intended to be of exactly the same import as the last, indicates a temper somewhat similar : "*I am not holy enough to apply for salvation.*" Let us give attention to this also.

That the awakened sinner is not to remain idle, is very certain. He is to renounce every habit or practice, which he knows to be sinful, whether of the grosser or of the more refined character. He is to weigh all his thoughts and actions by the standard of GOD'S HOLY LAW. He is to look carefully into his disposition and temper, and to turn from the snares to which they expose him. He is to abandon all that is

contrary to the will of his Maker. The whole of this is contemporaneous with his approach to Christ: it is part of the very act of "arising to go to his Father." But to consider this as a preparative course, and success in it as a preliminary of his own, is obviously incongruous: for it is plain to him that he cannot succeed, in his unaided efforts to obey the dictates of an enlightened conscience. He requires that divine assistance which mercy has tendered. But the very act of seeking this, is that of approaching Christ. The pretence, therefore, that he will remain until he is holier, is an absurdity in terms.

This reason for keeping back, moreover, perverts the requirements of God; and looks to salvation, not as a gift, but as a reward of holiness. Or, if this be denied, is not the inquirer contemplating a partial change, to be self-effected, and to be accepted as an earnest of his disposition to accomplish more? Some degree of self-complacency is to accompany this offering: and there will be quite as much in preparing it.

But is all this disavowed? Does such a one disclaim the idea of a reward? Does he say, "*I am now so vile, that I tremble at the thought of entering into the presence of a pure and holy God; and, for this reason, I would watch and fast, pray and meditate, and examine myself, that*

I may be in a better state for believing in Christ?"

To do all this is well: but to render the doing of it the reason and the means of keeping at a distance from the Cross of Redemption, is turning that which may be good into an instrument of evil. Alas, how slowly we receive the blessed truth, that salvation is FREE! Even when the heart has been in some little measure humbled, it opens with apparent reluctance for the reception of the glorious, the encouraging, yet the humiliating truth.

The sinner knows that he stands in need of mercy; but he clings to the idea that he is to *render himself* a fit recipient. He will tell us that he does not deserve heaven; and yet, by a strange equivocation, he hopes to deserve the grace which is to carry him thither. He does not expect to merit pardon; but he does expect to win the divine approbation which is to lead to his forgiveness. What self-contradiction! And how contradictory also to the word of God! For the design of the blessed gospel was expressly to shew "the exceeding riches" of grace, and to let the transgressor see, not only that he may be saved, but that in his salvation the *undeserved* mercy of Jehovah is triumphantly manifest. Attach the smallest merit to the sinner; and this design is completely frustrated: *favour* is changed into *justice*, *grace* is transformed into *debt*.

O, why should not the truth be received as it is? The Divine Physician is not only able, but ready, to administer a cure to all who sincerely apply to him. And can it be necessary that they should be better, when they approach him, if he can heal them as they are? It is indeed to be regretted, that the simplest of heavenly directions are so often obscured by the artificial dogmas of men; and by laboured descriptions of certain holy dispositions, as pre-requisites for all who would venture into the presence of Christ. How common, therefore, is the prayer that the Lord would grant a certain something—it is not known what; or enable us to reach a certain point—it is not known where; in preparation for accepting the terms of the gospel! All of which means neither more nor less than a desire that the Creator would enable us to achieve something, as the ground of acceptance with himself. Here is a palpable inconsistency; a prayer for a gift which is to become the ground of merited reward! Yet such inconsistencies are not rare, in the practical sentiments of the awakened sinner.

But there may be a principle deeper than this, concealed under the expression, “*I am not holy enough.*” It is sometimes the mere cloak of a spurious humility: for it is expressed when the utterer cherishes a latent hope, that this low opinion of himself will lead to the divine compla-

cency. If it were examined to the bottom, we should see the fatal mingling of pride with all the agitations of the heart.

One thing is certain, that while such a man professes to esteem so highly the holiness of God, as to feel unworthy to approach him, he is *practically denying* other points of his character, for which Jehovah claims our especial homage, and which are the medium of access to his presence.

But we dismiss this subject. There is far more interest in the one which you have suggested in the following words: "*My heart is insensible to the truths of which my judgment is convinced: I am incapable of feeling on the only matter which is worthy of emotion.*" It is doubtful whether, in the whole mass of complaints uttered by inquirers, there is one more universal than this: and it is certain that there is not one more painful. But it is not confined to the inquirer. It is very frequently heard from the lips of the Christian: and it is, not seldom, one of those mistakes which arise from a sincere jealousy of self. I am acquainted with some whose whole lives are shaded by this supposed insensibility; who invariably condemn themselves in their most favoured moments; and who are ever ready, on this account, to appropriate to themselves all the evidences of hypocrisy; who,

when the tender mercies of Christ, or his sufferings and death, are the subjects of meditation, are prepared to exclaim, “What goodness! what love!” and yet complain that all this is unaffecting to their hearts. There are many who admit, with apparent admiration, all that is general in the fulness and loveliness of Christ; but who find a serious difficulty when they think of a particular application to themselves, or when they look for a personal operation in their own souls. They can unite with others in admiration and praise, when they consider the excellencies of the Saviour: but, because their feelings are not sufficiently strong, unbelief begins to question and limit the mercies of God; praise gives way to silence; admiration is changed into doubt. Hence that cheerlessness and melancholy, which attach themselves to the devotional exercises of many; and which, while they pervade the whole mind, give it a cast of dejection which faith alone can alter. It is not rare to hear such persons say, “I could almost desire some trial or affliction that might melt down this heart of stone; that some feeling might flow; that I might enjoy some little evidence of a soul susceptible of love. But as it is, unmoved as I am—O my God—in a sinful lethargy,

’Tis just, I own, that thou depart
From so insensible a heart:

Nor would I shun the sad decree
To spend my days in grief for thee !
'Tis not the painful I deplore,
But sin's benumbing, hard'ning power !

Here is a cause of distress which would appear to many almost beyond the reach of remedy. And while the sufferer continues to look at it as such, it would not be easy to apply a remedy, even were it near at hand.

It should not be denied that tenderness of feeling is, to a certain extent, necessary. It is impossible to experience the power of divine truth without it. But there are some errors in this state of mind which are peculiarly worthy of our attention, and we must attempt their removal. To do so, we will commence with one observation.

We may as readily deceive ourselves with respect to emotions arising from a religious subject, as those which exist in a matter of benevolence. A statement of human misery and wretchedness, made before two persons, may produce the following effects : one may be touched with sympathy, and the tears which flow may lead to a persuasion of tenderness of heart ; and the other may hear the tale with an unaltered eye, and yet think and feel far more deeply. The first may shrink from entering the abode of squalid misery, and exhibit no movement of really benevolent principle ; while the second will devote time and

care to mitigate the evils of the sufferer. These are things of daily observation. So there are those who can shed tears of apparent sorrow, when the pathetic tale of a Saviour's life and death is told; while the fixed thought of others may be accompanied with unmoistened cheeks: but the feelings of the first may be "as the early dew," while the impressions of the second are as indelible as the etchings of steel. Now, which was the "neighbour" here; which the Levite, and the Samaritan? A difference, a most essential difference, must be admitted to exist in both the physical and the moral constitution: and it should not be forgotten that, while a physical weakness may lead to what is called tenderness of feeling, this ready access to tears, which relieve an oppressed heart, may prevent an abiding effect on the mind. I would not say that it is always thus: but I would not hesitate to say that we are not always proper judges of our feelings; and that the self-jealous inquirer is very likely to deceive himself in the judgment which he passes.

The truth is, there is no quality belonging to human nature, on which more fallacious stress is laid than *susceptibility of feeling*. It is the hope of thousands who have no just idea of their true condition, but who regard this susceptibility as a demonstration that their hearts are open to conviction, and their consciences unseared. Others

attach to it a moral quality, with which it is supposed to have an inseparable connexion. Both these notions are false. In the first case, sensibility may be merely a material of the physical constitution, always liable to excitability, even while the moral sense becomes blunted. What a melancholy evidence have we of this in disappointments, in bereavements, and in all the phases of sorrow! A variety of circumstances, wholly disconnected from the subject of religion itself, may render us more alive to a melting impression at one time than at another, while we are as far from repentance as ever.

In the second case, it is not uncommon to find the impenitent sinner consoling himself in the thought that his heart is sympathetic; attributing his painful emotions, when he looks upon a sight of misery, to some intrinsic worth in his nature: while there may be as much virtue in any other feeling within him as in this; and while this very sympathy might lead him, if he were a civil judge, to sacrifice justice and the weal of society, to relieve a personal, selfish, and lawless sympathy.

I repeat it, and you will pardon the repetition, a certain tenderness of feeling is necessary as an evidence of our earnestness; but its extent is not to be prescribed, and we are not qualified to be judges of it ourselves.

Nor is this all. In addition to what I have said, the same subjects will not affect constitutions of equal feeling in the same way, nor to the same extent. Yet they may produce the same results, by apparently different means. Now carry this remark through all the diversities of character which they may reach; and you will observe how incorrect would be any general conclusion from the mere intensity of emotion.

But we may advance beyond this. There are persons whose conduct is governed by their sensibilities; whose sense of duty is dependent on emotions; the two rising or departing together. Here principle and feeling are one: and we, accordingly, find the zeal of such persons as fluctuating as their excitements.

Mistakes on this subject may be, and often are, productive of serious injury. This is evident in those cases in which weak, but perhaps sincere, Christians are examining their frames of mind even to a partial exclusion of the principle of obedience: and in which, too, they may unwarily condemn a temper that is unobtrusive and silent, because the workings of the heart are not proclaimed by the starting tear.

But while all these may be errors of the Christian himself, errors by which he is deceived in respect to both his own heart and those of others; the awakened sinner is still more in

danger of deception. He has read of the mental sufferings of others, or heard them described ; and he imagines that there must be a uniform rule. He understands, in some measure, the extent of these sufferings, and he deems a participation in them necessary. He may have taken his conceptions from ministrations of the holy word, in which a delineation of the returning penitent may have been justly given, yet not so as to suit his circumstances in all their particulars. When he reads forms of devotion, or a prayer for the penitent, or a hymn to a similar purpose, he discovers the tone of feeling too high to correspond with his own : and he forgets that no precise rule of admeasurement was ever intended ; or that such forms may be often designed, rather to assist and elevate, than to meet the actual state of feeling : and that even then, their authors could never have expected to produce an equal effect upon all who heard or saw them. But unhappily our inferences are prone to rashness, and we are apt to attach an undue authority to the compositions, as well as to the opinions, of pious men.

It is a sad mistake, when the *pungency* of sorrow is deemed the *measure* of sincerity ; and artificial efforts are made to promote and sustain a deep work of the passions, without directing the mind to any other than this single end. Hence the inquirer, after being made sensible of his

condition as a sinner, is sometimes kept back from the proper object of his inquiry, in order to obtain a certain state of distress with which he is directed to meet his Saviour. With this in view, the law, in all its terrors, is placed before him. Its thunders are repeated, and its flashes renewed.

I have already intimated, that no man is likely to lay hold of the free grace of God without a sense of his necessitous situation. But it is delusive to suppose that the law, disconnected from the gospel, will produce this important effect. It may furnish a knowledge of sin; for this is its proper tendency. But while it stands alone, though it compel conviction, it will be as likely to drive to desperation, or betray into principles and views of self-righteous expectation, as to fit the soul to be reconciled to God. Believe me, it is in the death of Jesus Christ that the curse of transgression is most clearly legible: while it is here alone that an antidote is offered to the wounds of conscience. Without a survey of this, the law can never be made the instrument of evangelical repentance; and, with all the alarm which the sight of impending condemnation may create in the mind of the sinner, there will not be a single disposition which will either place him in a better condition for receiving the mercy of his God, or produce a single desire that could lead him to true holiness.

Such a prescription, then, is unscriptural. And I may add, that its effects are likely to terminate in an abandonment of the whole matter on the part of the inquirer; and in leaving him more completely out of the reach of conviction than ever. Yet this prescription very often meets the views of an awakened sinner, who often looks with as much assurance for a certain preparatory measure of feeling, as for the final issue of conversion. "O that I could feel!" he frequently exclaims; while the very earnestness of his manner betrays his sensibility. "I am willing to suffer any thing, or to undergo any anguish that would bring hope to my soul, or make me an object of attention to my God!" What vanity of effort is here! And how it diverts the mind from its proper object! But all this is the suggestion of an uneasy and inconsiderate mind.

Can it be, my dear sir, that Jesus Christ demands penance at our hands? Have not the expiatory sufferings which are necessary for our salvation, been undergone by himself? And is it not true that "*there remaineth no more sacrifice for sin?*" It is an idea of natural religion, which has been incorporated into a corruption of Christianity, that the sufferings which we may inflict on ourselves can be of avail in the great object of salvation. That disposition, then, which renders you willing to endure any thing as part of the

terms tendered to God, in exchange for what he alone can give, whatever vehemence of desire it may be supposed to exhibit, is radically self-righteous, self-confident, and self-esteeming.

I admit, that a lamentation over hardness of heart, or an expression of sorrow because the judgment and affections do not act efficiently together, is consistent with the most unleavened sincerity. But then, to require a given degree of animal feeling in all constitutions, before the soul is supposed in a fit state to surrender itself to the Redeemer, is an intermeddling with the simple plan of the gospel. I beseech you, let these things alone. Be not among the number of those who stand aloof from the cross, because they have not undergone a due portion of suffering; who grow impatient under delay; indifferent, and then turn back for ever: the sad history of many a soul. Never attempt to take the gauge of your sorrow, or to look for mercy with any hope proportioned to mere emotions. Rather take no note of your anxiety. But inquire of your own heart, "Am I not a sinner condemned, justly, before God? Am I not utterly helpless in myself? And yet, is there not grace, full and free, offered in the gospel, to every such sinner?"

Before I conclude this letter, let me invite your attention to a few words, touching another complaint; "*I have reason to apprehend that I have*

no conviction of sin. It is true, my judgment is convinced; and my understanding assents to the awful truth that I am guilty before God. Yet I have no clear views of my sinfulness. The whole subject is confused to my sight. I wish to confront my iniquities as they are; and I would make them distinct to my view, whatever pain it might occasion. But I labour to effect this in vain." This difficulty belongs to no particular class of experience. It may be connected with much distress; and may be mentioned in the bitterness of despair. Or, it may belong to a more calm, but not less serious, operation of mind. But wherever it is found, it carries with it a train of apprehensions for which there may be much reason, and which are often exceedingly perplexing.

It is true, that without the knowledge of our sinfulness we shall not approach the Saviour so as to be accepted by him. It is equally true, that a *clear* discovery of our guilt and depravity is highly desirable. But still, it would be inexpedient to propose any invariable rule of judgment; or to require the same distinctness and strength of conception in every awakened sinner. That very diversity of moral and physical constitution which produces a variety of degrees of feeling, may act with very similar effects on our conceptions of truth. I have known some of the most exemplary Christians who were always ready to

repeat the complaint before us ; but who, notwithstanding, possessed almost every evidence that could be satisfactory to themselves, of having passed from death unto life. I have known others, who, in the commencement of their career, were equally solicitous on this account ; but to whom the evil of their hearts was more distinctly presented as they advanced in life. And there may be frames of spirit within all of us which, without any assignable cause, render our views on this subject more discriminating, or more confused.

But I can come nearer to your state of mind, by bringing before you two examples of hourly observation. The grossly impure or profane have always near them such tangible proof of their guilt, that if they are awakened to serious reflection at all, they cannot escape a sense of the evil. Even the laws and sentiments of society arraign them ; and perhaps lead them, in a moment of thoughtfulness, to compare their conduct with a more holy standard. Each act stands out prominently, and marks the temper and dispositions of the soul : and while it displays a total unfitness for heaven, justifies the sentence of condemnation. Such a man may be painfully sensible of his wickedness even before he has entered on a close examination of his life. There may be a living conscience within a heart that is dead. But, whenever such an investigation is fairly

begun, remorse will accompany it with equal pace. There can be no subterfuge here; and there is very little room for sophistry. Whatever this sinner may finally do, he now pleads guilty to the charge of a witness within him.

On the other hand, one who is distinguished by an amiable and moral deportment, may be confronted by no such accusers. The secret belief of his safety, which he has so naturally cherished, and which is so congenial with our natural ideas of accountableness, assists in concealing the true state of his heart. Now the difficulty of convincing such a one of the evils of his soul consists in the following truth, that *actions are more prominent to the sight than motives; when the former are flagrant, the attention may be arrested and retained by them with comparative ease; but motives lie deeper; and it requires some strong inducement to lead us to a thorough examination of them.*

I have seen a good illustration of this in a pious young friend who is still living, an ornament to the church to which he is attached. During a visit which he once paid me, while under distressing concern, he gave me substantially the following statement: "I do not know that I have ever been accused of what the world would call immorality. The acquittal of a satisfied conscience has constituted much of my happiness: and even to this

day, I do not know that either of my parents ever impeached my conduct of a more serious crime than neglect or carelessness. While I have sat under the sound of the gospel, I have admitted its excellence, and always believed myself embraced within its promises. I can remember, when the affecting interview between the Saviour and the young ruler was the subject of a discourse which awakened others around me. My own mind was, for a short season, startled. I wished to be made sensible of sin, but I could recollect no obvious charge against myself. I could fix my eye on nothing which could rivet its gaze; and, as I passed willingly and rapidly to the conclusion, that I kept nothing back from my God, my peace was not long disturbed. During all this time I knew nothing of myself. It had not occurred to me, that the heartlessness with which I discharged every duty, the secret pride which followed it, and the insipidity and tastelessness of my devotion, were melancholy proofs of my unfitness for the society of heaven. Or, if a doubt ever remained in my mind, it was easy to conclude that any change which I needed would accompany my transition into another world. I did not then see how this unscriptural reliance opposed the moral government of God; nor how the hope I had cherished, arrogantly superseded salvation by grace. In the midst of this security

a circumstance occurred which threw me as near despair as I had been to presumption.—It was a temptation to commit a sin where there was every thing to entice, and, in the event of detection, not much to lose in the eye of the world. It was a proposal of a sabbath day's excursion of pleasure. There was little time to reflect; and each moment swelled the force of temptation. I yielded. And from that hour remorse has never left me. In vain have I argued with myself that this is a solitary evil. In vain I appealed to my own heart. Even that seems changed. I see no more evidence of its innocence. I behold a selfish policy in all my motives, and a hatred of that holiness which I had flattered myself I esteemed. I am lost. And my doom is aggravated by the remembrance of a life and a peace in direct opposition to the scheme of the gospel." It is not necessary to finish this story: the application is plain.

But let us suppose the inducements to inquiry to be strong, in any such case. Let the judgment be convinced that all this morality is of no avail. Still, while there seems little palpable to lay hold of, and nothing which appears very near to admonish, and almost nothing to awaken the feelings to a lively interest in the subject; it may be exceedingly difficult to fix and concentrate the attention; or to single out the lurking evils of the heart.

Yet, if we were able to complete this purpose, as I have already said, the effects would vary in different persons, though the same end may be as certainly accomplished.

The false conclusion, however, on the whole subject consists in imagining, that a certain intensity and fulness of conviction is required on the part of the sinner, before he is at liberty to recognize the invitations of grace as applicable to himself; that this conviction must be well defined; and that its action must be regular. The Redeemer once said, "they that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick:" and hence it has been concluded that, unless there be a consciousness of the power of disease, all application must be in vain. But the Redeemer could not have meant that none stand in need of a physician but such as are fully sensible of their state. His expression was a reproof to the querulous Pharisees, who considered themselves whole and the publicans and sinners sick. This the Saviour seems to have admitted, for the sake of argument; while he rendered it a reason for his associating with those of disreputable name. But, surely, he did not mean to intimate that all these degraded men had a just sense of their guilt, and that it was expedient, for this reason, that he should associate with them.

Apply to this subject a passage from the pro-

phet Isaiah, which plainly refers to the invitations of sovereign grace through the future Messiah :—
“ Ho, every one that thirsteth ; come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money, come ye, buy and eat ; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.”* The thirst referred to in this case was certainly not for spiritual blessings. It was for earthly happiness only. It was the panting of an immortal soul for pleasure : and it was indicated by toil and expense to purchase enjoyment which our smitten earth has not to give. The remonstrance which follows this passage tells us as much : “ Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which satisfieth not.” There is no necessary connexion between such a desire as this, and that hungering for righteousness of which the Saviour spoke in his sermon on the Mount. And the same may be said of his address on the last day of the feast.

The degree of the conviction of sin, then, has nothing to do with the offer of salvation. This is put into the hands of all : and it is intended to meet the necessities of every inquirer after happiness.

You are to look to the gospel, my dear sir, for that peace which your soul desires ; and not to

* Isaiah lv. 1.

your particular mental impressions : and you see the reasonableness of this, in the fact, that the man who is under the most powerful evangelical convictions, is the last to consider them acceptable on their own account. Let your convictions, then, be what they may, *they* are never to afford you satisfaction in themselves.

Adieu. Remember that, “ by grace are ye saved through faith ; and that not of yourselves ; it is the gift of God ; *not of works*, lest any man should boast.”

I am yours, &c.

LETTER V.

Complaint of irresolution.—Its baneful effects.—Defective nature of unstable resolutions.—Remedy.—Imagined peculiarity of situation.—How to be counteracted.—The sin and folly of speculating on the expected change.—Extreme danger of this state of mind.—Unscriptural and perverse objections. — “God will not pardon *me*.” — “I do not see *how* the promises can be fulfilled in myself.” — The glorious sufficiency of pardon.—The grand duty, ever incumbent.

MY DEAR SIR,

WHEN I adverted, in my third letter, to that buoyancy of feeling which is so frequently a subject of complaint, and which so often leads to a desperate renunciation of the professed pursuit after holiness and blessedness, I did not mean to confound this complaint with that of any other sense of irresolution. For there are certainly many who mourn, with bitterness of heart, under the consciousness of an irresolute and wavering mind, and who yet have no characteristic levity of disposition. Irresolution is the lament of many a Christian. The very language in which you

have expressed your feelings, may be the utterings of a soul whose supreme affections are consecrated to God. But it may likewise be adopted by one who is influenced by a temporary earnestness, which never comes to a favourable decision. You tell me, “ There are times when the object of my salvation assumes an overwhelming importance; when every thought is engrossed by it; and when it would seem impossible to divert my attention from the reflections it occasions: and yet, the next hour insensibility succeeds; and I cannot recal one of my former ideas. There is a fluctuating operation of the mind, which seems peculiar to the subject. In the event of ordinary affliction, I have noted a sense of my loss to vary; but even when it was least intense, and when my faculties were abstracted in some degree by other things, I was conscious of an oppressive weight on my heart. Here, on the contrary, I discover a vacillation for which I cannot account; a rapid transition from interest to stupidity.”

There is nothing extraordinary in all this, though the subject of such experience is apt to attribute much mystery to it; to imagine a powerful supernatural agency employed against him; or, to suspect that, either his natural peculiarities shut him out from the hope into which others enter, or that God, from some unrevealed cause, will not pardon him; or else that he must, in some

fatal moment, have committed the unpardonable sin. Such suspicions, you tell me, have often covered your prospects with darkness.

I confess that, where this difficulty exists, if it do not lead to the suspicions which you have noted, it may very easily end in some other conclusion of despair. There are some minds which, from habit or constitution, must necessarily encounter it: minds, which take their present tone from their last associates; which retain an impression from the last object of attention, to give way to the next, and which are never uniform in their character for a single day. In such a case we should look for this complaint. Retirement is, indeed, always important in all instances of religious inquiry; but in this, most particularly, we should urge a seclusion from any temporal objects or occupations, which are not within the sphere of indispensable duty; and an unremitted confinement of attention to the great subject of salvation. The same advice we should give, where irresolution arises from the slightness of the impression made on the mind.

In either case, the consciousness of irresolution is painful, and often discouraging in the extreme. The awakened sinner, in the first hour of alarm, determines with much earnestness, that he will not permit his thoughts to be diverted from the great concern of eternal life. Some intrusive

trifle engages his attention: but he returns from his wanderings to seriousness again, ashamed of himself, and perhaps uneasy for the consequences. The same process takes place again and again. Irresolution becomes a habit; and the sinner loses all confidence in the bare possibility of a happy issue. Or, where such is not the result, the mind acquires an unprofitable restlessness, and becomes almost incapable of fixedness of thought. Some extraordinary power would appear necessary, to impart an habitual seriousness, by altering the very shape and texture of the mind.

This picture is strengthened, when we recollect the reviews which such a man takes of the past. When, it may be, at the very time of his arrival at a point of renewed seriousness, he remembers that he had reached this point more than once before, and had been led from it again to perfect listlessness and indifference: when he can remember, too, exactly similar operations of his mind; and, as if he had recorded his thoughts at the time, he is able to ponder them over, and to see in them the very state which distinguishes him now. No train of reflections can be more discouraging than those which follow, where retrospections of this character are fully indulged. Without even an active conviction of sin, he may feel the dull influence of anticipated lethargy stealing over his

spirits ; and all effort seems a mockery, alike to his soul, and his God.

I cannot weep ! I dare not pray !

The very source of tears is dry !

And what—when hope is lost for aye—

Avails the prayer of agony ?

A dark cloud lowers before mine eye ;

A chain is twined around my heart ;

I cannot pierce that clouded sky ;

I cannot tear those bands apart.

The original fault, in this melancholy case, consists in the defective nature of the resolutions which were so often broken. I have already said that it is possible to resolve with such a vehemence of feeling, as entirely to overlook our natural weakness ; and, in the ardour of our determination, utterly to forget the strength of our foes. Thus we may offer our prayers for divine aid, while we are so self-confident that there is very little sincerity in the petition. We may imagine that we possess the two ingredients of a successful resolve, reliance on God, and self-determination ; while there lurks within the heart all that could keep us apart from spiritual assistance, and when even a very little pains would enable us to detect an unhallowed and presumptuous confidence.

Resolutions are often formed in a season of affliction ; and the state of mind which prompted

them, may bring no better issue than the last. There is no condition in which we are more liable to deceive ourselves, than that of temporal adversity. The partial subduement of passion, which personal grief has effected, is mistaken for meekness; the diversion of thoughts from objects of recent attention, is a fancied change of taste and desire; a sense of care and dreariness takes the name of some Christian grace; and the mourner already imagines himself to have made an easy transition from worldliness to piety. Or, if he do not assume so bold a conclusion, the resolutions which he forms are entirely dependant on the intensity of his sorrow; and his expectations of success are derived from the same source.

This is a sad misapplication of the leadings of an afflictive providence; which were designed, not to achieve his salvation by any special influence in themselves, but to direct him to faith and repentance.

But what is to be done, where a sense of irresolution and moral weakness produces an influence so discouraging? Is there reason for despair? By no means. All this is a sad proof of human helplessness: but it is no evidence against the power of Christ to save. Such a one should feel humbled; but not disheartened. The recollection of the past should only furnish a strong argument for implicit reliance on the Saviour;

while it should teach him to lean no more on himself: and the very feelings which it might produce in the bosom, if they were rightly applied, would be salutary. He might see that his case is indeed desperate; but that it is only a desperation in his own resources. It furnishes a reason why he should hope no more from mere human efforts; but it presents, too, a plea for the entire surrender of the soul to Jesus. "*O, I can do nothing!*" exclaims the agitated and desponding spirit, as he comes down from his exertion and labour. True: you can do nothing, The word of God has affirmed this before you admitted it; you are brought only to an experimental conviction of what you would not before believe. Receive, then, more readily the converse of your position: *Christ can do all things for you.* Surrender, therefore, your heart to him NOW, when the lesson of your own insufficiency is so plainly and painfully pressed upon you. Behold! The Redeemer is emphatically denominated the **STRENGTH** of *them that believe*: and the very invitation of the gospel is to the sensibly weak.

Alas, how sad is it, when this very essential discovery of indecision and imbecility, to which the scriptures had pointed, has been made in our own experience, only to be perverted to evil, instead of leading to the Redeemer!

The idea of *some peculiarity of situation, or*

some singular temperament of mind, excluding you from a state which you desire to obtain, is not uncommon, though you may conceive it to be exclusively your own case.

If we could read the feelings of all inquirers, it is probable that we should find this impression written upon most of them. The frequenter of scenes of fashion and folly, and the man in the laborious and humble walks of life; the nurtured child of Christian care, and the neglected offspring of godless parents; the vain, and the proud; the inconsiderate, and the thoughtful; each have their peculiar difficulties. Indeed, all habits, views, or feelings, which we may have cherished, previously to conviction of divine truth, will produce their appropriate effects on the mind, at this crisis. Some of these may cause more serious perplexities than others; yet all the conduct or maxims of life that is past, will carry their consequences on, to thought or to feeling: and we may be unable to discriminate, between these effects and the natural state of the heart. Hence the inquirer may think his lot singularly hard, and that of another comparatively easy; though, in fact, he knows not their real difference. But apart from this, when the awakened sinner has been disappointed in his anticipations; when he has not found the path he is travelling such as he expected it, and he is

unable to account for the cares which embarrass him; he may very naturally conclude that his experience varies from that of any other, and that an inconceivable something forms a barrier between him and God. Not infrequently, in searching for this, he leaves the track of plain duty, and wanders he knows not where. And then what a disposition is there to look around for analogies; to inquire into the experience of others; to institute comparisons; and to derive encouragement or despair from sources foreign from the great object of salvation!

A single consideration ought to banish all apprehensions produced by this supposed singularity. The scheme of the gospel, and the invitations of scripture, are designed to meet every exigency. If the cares and doubts of the inquirer were a thousand times more distressing than they are, they would not furnish the least evidence against this truth: and were I about to account for the unhappy conclusions, which are so often drawn in this exigency, I would examine the present habits and practices of the complainer, in order to do so. It would be easy to discover the mind, watching the state of excitement, speculating on its changes, impatient and eager. O, how widely different is that more successful course of conduct, which renders our difficulties a *reason* and a *subject for prayer*;

which makes all that is discouraging an argument for perseverance; and which, taking hold of the precepts of God, turns them, after the example of the Psalmist, into materials of heartfelt petition! *

But, knowing so little as we do of the hearts of others, and yet entering into this needless comparison between ourselves and them; judging too, as we do, only from what is visible to the eye; it is not astonishing that we often find little resemblance between ourselves and them. Nor is it a wonder, that even the confirmed Christian often believes his religious experience dissimilar from that of his brethren around him. But still, the grand and leading principles of human nature are every where the same: "As, in water, face answereth to face, so the heart of man to man." It is therefore worse than unwise, to imagine our condition so peculiar as to be without the reach of the ordinary application of mercy. Such a conclusion is an impeachment of the sufficiency of redemption, and an imputation against the veracity of the divine promises.

Before I dismiss this ground of complaint altogether, I must warn you against a practice which gives rise to it, and which is entirely

* Psalm li. 10, and many of the petitions in Psalm cxix.]

inconsistent with the attainment of our end: I mean the practice of *occupying the mind with speculations of what the future change is to be, the manner in which it is to be effected, and the particular sensations which we shall undergo.* This is a busy idleness which never does good, but invariably leads to great evil. It has a tendency as direct to defeat our purpose, as some employments which appear to be of a more worldly nature. The confusion of mind and thought which this practice produces, can hardly be too much deprecated. It keeps the gospel out of view, or suffers only an occasional appearance of it; while its main and ultimate bearing is lost. The consequence, as well as the fact itself, may be seen by a moment's illustration. Any object which we contemplate ought to affect us according to its nature; but that effect will be in proportion to the impression it makes upon us; and that impression, again, will depend upon the intentness and steadiness of attention to the object. Now, if we divide our attention, or suffer it to be engaged in a speculating analysis of the workings of mind, the employment is in opposition to our professed end. It is no other than serious trifling, which we should scarcely tolerate in any earthly concern of magnitude. Let me suppose information of a very interesting nature to have reached you: would it be possible

to detect yourself in labouring to discover the manner in which it operates upon you, the particular analysis of your feelings? Would not such abstruse reasoning completely supersede the happy effect of the intelligence? And so is it with respect to the offers of the gospel. You believe that you are a lost sinner; and that the only method of salvation is to be found in the scheme of which Christ is the Founder and Revealer. But, if your attention be diverted from this, surely no expectation of its efficacy upon you can be reasonably entertained. That at which you are looking is not the gospel; but something essentially different from it.

This indulgence in the play of imagination often introduces a most powerful temptation in the way; especially where previous habits insensibly lead to its exercise. There are those who live much of their time in regions of fancy; whose happiness is found in aërial matters and things; and who have always a resort from pain to pleasure—in their musings. In such a case as this, the evil which I am now condemning is to be very seriously deprecated, as a powerful means of destroying the effect of conviction: for, while part of this precious period of his time is expended by the inquirer in speculations on the anticipated change of his heart, he loses sight of the common centre to which all his thoughts

should be directed ; and his sinfulness and danger vanish together from his sight. It is not merely a delay of the object avowedly sought, that is to be apprehended from this castle-building. Truth itself is sacrificed, for that which is unreal, and which will be cruelly disappointing.

Nor is this all. In the idle occupation of speculating on the future change, all surmises are sure to be wrong. Fancy can create no resemblance to the fact as it is. The scriptures leave us entirely in the dark as to the mode and manner of divine operations. They negative all our preconceived views, while we are watching to ascertain the progress of the renewal of soul. We know, that in this great work the Holy Spirit exerts his influence : but this is all that we can discover ; “ whence it cometh and whither it goeth ” are known to God alone. A variety of questions, on this topic, have occasioned much unnecessary discussion : such as, whether this divine influence acts previously to a distinct perception of the truth, and is the immediate cause of such perception : or whether, while the mind is directed to the truth, this divine influence accompanies or flows from it, and thus renders it effectual : whether the change is effected so gradually, that its particular developements cannot be distinctly traced in their progress, or in our

review of them : or whether some extraordinary excitement, overwhelming in its force, and memorable as the grand era of our life, takes effect at once. All these are less than secondary matters, with one who has no right to withhold a single moment from his God.

Speculations of this nature are not the only pernicious ones with which the mind may be occupied in this important period. The discursiveness of fancy is always apt to extend anticipation to other things. In the prospective career every thing is scrutinized. Future schemes and plans are formed ; their influence and bearing examined ; future habits, and the alterations which they may produce upon our feelings and temporal interest, crowd vividly into the licensed imagination.

There is one matter, in particular, which is very often prominent in the minds of those who are partially impressed ; that of *making a profession of religion*. So closely connected is this with the subject of religion itself, in the view of most, that when we have often spoken privately on the danger of neglecting the soul, a very frequent reply is, “ I am not fit to partake of the holy communion : ” a reply which evades the point to which we wish the reflections directed. It is not an *avowal* of religion that we are now urging. Important as is the dying command of

the Saviour, it is not likely to be neglected when the heart is surrendered to him. But it is faith and repentance towards God, it is the hazard of the immortal spirit, to which we are calling the attention: and if we can fix it on *them*, we have accomplished our end. Yet there is sometimes a waywardness, which turns the eye from piety to its profession. The inquirer knows that a public avowal of his faith would succeed his attainment of renewing grace. That is an act of the deepest solemnity: and invested as it often is, by adventitious circumstances of awe in the mind, it is not unapt to engross his thoughts, to the exclusion of what is more suited to his state. He knows, too, that such an act involves a vast amount of responsibility; and his mind ruminates on this with doubt and fearfulness. He forgets that in reality there are no new obligations implied, no new duties enjoined, in this important transaction: for every obligation, and every duty, which flow from an open espousal of the Redeemer's cause, were incumbent on us before. They arise, not from the act of consecrating ourselves, but from a previous divine command: and we are no more at liberty to cull for ourselves certain precepts and to reject others, than we are to abandon, at will, the whole of the sacred decalogue. All this, however, is too readily forgotten.

Nay, his fears on this point are still more excited, from a further cause. As, in common opinion, more is expected from a professor of religion than from the mere worldling, an additional source of apprehension appears before him: and this perhaps completely supersedes the great object of inquiry. Let me bring to your notice an example in point, which occurs to my memory. The heart of an acquaintance was impressed with a sense of the necessity of religion, and favourable expectations were entertained of the issue. But a single thought, which frequently presented itself, ultimately checked his seriousness, and restored him more completely to the world than ever. He had been unsuccessful in mercantile engagements; and, in the midst of his thoughtfulness, he often compared the consequences of declaring himself on the side of religion with this fact. "What will the world think of me," he would say, "if I profess to be religious? It looks like a dishonourable covert from scrutiny. It will be imagined a design to gain the good will of others, under a cloak of hypocrisy; an excuse from a possible reproach." You can easily judge of the effect of such apprehensions upon a high-minded spirit, conscious of its integrity, and shrinking from the imputation of wrong. The consequences were as I have stated. A continual recurrence to this ground of fear diverted

his attention from the state of his soul; and, at last, furnished a satisfactory excuse for postponing what conscience and the word of God declared to be the duty of the present moment. You observe the insidiousness of all this reasoning: and you see how easily Satan may make an instrument of it, to effect a complete diversion of the soul from its eternal interests.

This practice of speculating on the future is not visible to an observer. Nor is it often indicated by the inquirer himself; unless it be visible by some indirect hint, or discoverable by questions which such speculation induces him to ask. It is, most usually, a secret employment which he would be ashamed to mention on his own part; and of which, possibly, he is not deliberately conscious; and yet to which there is a natural tendency, during intervals when the mind is not more profitably exercised, and when this employment furnishes a fallacious relief to the anxiety of his feelings.

Leaving this, let me go back to another of the grounds of discouragement, which you have taken occasion to suggest; *the fear that God, for some unknown reason, is not willing to pardon YOU, however free his pardon and mercy may be to others.* It would be unjust to say, that this complaint is always insincere. Yet it is often expressed in the petulance of the moment, without

any real conviction, and perhaps, without any strong apprehension of its truth. Ah, how deep is the criminality of thus sporting with the divine promises ! Or it may be the conclusion of a mind suffering under deep depression, and expressing it hardly knows what: a thoughtless vent of feeling, the fruit of selfishness. Or it may arise from present disappointment. Or it may be, as it very often is, the gloomy dictate of remorse. But, whatever may be its source, it always indicates an ignorance, or a want of consideration, of the very nature and plan of redeeming grace. Often, indeed, it is utterly impossible to reason with the complainer. He seems to foster a melancholy belief against all the promises, and a wilful indisposition to examine the means and method of salvation. Yet such a man might have been able to argue well, against the unreasonableness of these very inferences in any one else. On the other hand, it is possible that the same truths, which he knows how to apply to a friend, but knows not how to appropriate to himself, might effectually reach him when they come from other lips. Or, it may be, that when they have failed at one time, they may be successful at another. So fitful and capricious is the state of the awakened sinner !

In some instances, the complaint of which I

am speaking might be expressed in other words : *I do not see HOW the promises of God could be fulfilled in me : the means of their accomplishment are not visible.* Here is a character of unbelief somewhat resembling that of the Samaritan lord, who refused faith in a prediction because he could not see the means of its completion. Because he could not decide whence succour could come, he discredited the pledge of its coming at all : and his infidelity ended in his ruin. Thus it often is with the sinner. Because he knows that there is no hope in his own resources, and does not see how God can operate without them, he frequently perishes in his incredulity, within the very reach of salvation. Alas, unbelief of the divine promises is often the last sin of which we are conscious ; and it may be committed at a time when we are least likely to be aware of doing so ! A proud reasoning that contradicts the word of God, and gives the lie to the Holy One of Israel, may exist, where we imagine nothing but an humble and humbling despondency.

You have already seen, that it is inconsistent with the divine economy of grace to refuse the application of the inquirer, for the sole reason that he is not embraced within an elective decree : and the following remarks may serve to convince you, that the exclamation so frequently heard from

the desponding sinner,—*My sins are too great to be forgiven*,—is without any foundation in truth.

A most prominent truth in the atonement of Jesus Christ is, that if it be sufficient to procure the pardon of a single sin, it is equally so to cover the most aggravated and complicated guilt. The salvation of a single soul required a sacrifice of infinite worth; and no number or extent of crimes can, therefore, be committed, to put the transgressor beyond the reach of its efficacy. The scriptures always speak of its *entire* sufficiency; and refer the loss of the soul to its own unbelief, or rejection of God's method of grace. You have often remarked how they contrast the condition of a penitent Magdalen, and a mourning Publican, with that of the self-righteous Pharisee. And this position is finely exemplified after the Saviour's ascension, when his murderers stood convicted before Peter, and, sensible of the atrocity of their guilt, asked, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" If ever there were an instance, in which we might have doubted the salvation of the repentant sinner, it was this. These men had witnessed the miracles of the Saviour, had seen the evidences of his divine mission, had heard his heavenly instructions, had consented to his death, effected under their own perjured accusations, had taunted him with in-

competency to save himself, and seemed to have sealed their certain doom, by the most awful imprecation that ever ascended to God,—“His blood be upon us and our children!” Yet the answer of the apostle indicated no wavering in his mind, respecting the possibility of their salvation: “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ.” ‘Repent, and by a public avowal manifested in baptism, take HIM to be your Saviour whom you treated with scorn, and of whose death yourselves are guilty.’

It deserves your consideration, that the word of God, when it announces the efficacy of the Redeemer’s blood, never annexes a proviso that the iniquity be not too great. On the contrary, it meets any doubt that could arise on this subject in the mind of the sinner, and anticipates all the fears which it might possibly occasion, in language which cannot be misunderstood. What a beautiful instance have we of this, in the message of God by the prophet Isaiah! “Come now, and let us reason together: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.” And, lest fear should still be awakened, through a misapprehension of the Creator’s character, and the transgressor should find a plea against all hope from the imputation of an unrelenting tem-

per to the deeply-injured party, God has left with us that most important admonition: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord: for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts." *

It is this very freeness and sufficiency of pardon, which, if duly considered, are so admirably adapted to melt the heart of the sinner, while they take away all possible excuse from the impenitent. If a doubt touching the fulness of salvation remained, and if he had reason to pause in order to settle the question whether he could be included in its offers, there would be some apology for his delay. But the simple reflection, that nothing on the part of God withholds the most abandoned sinner from mercy, ought to be a powerful motive to contrition, and should lead to an immediate surrender of the whole affections to Christ.

Is it not, then, adding unbelief to your former sins, to insist on your being an exception to a universal rule? Is it not criminal to indulge in such awful fancies, in direct opposition to the declarations of the gospel? Living in a world where the most guilty has been pardoned, the

* Isaiah lv. 8, 9.

most ungodly has been sanctified, and the most miserable blessed, what folly is it to retain a doubt of the riches of grace! What wickedness, thus to darken the glory of Jehovah, by making his thoughts and ways like ours, or by ascribing to him promises to whose performance he is not equal! Let all discouraging surmises alone. Believe, for God hath said it, that nothing can exclude you from the benefit of the Redeemer's death, but *that which is on your own part*, impenitence and unbelief. O, it is distressing to see the convinced sinner pacing dejectedly around the promises of Christ, beholding their infinite worth, desiring to share in their participation; and yet, not only not approaching a step nearer to them, but listening to the idle vagaries of a spirit distressed, and canvassing the question whether *he* be not an exception to a rule which is otherwise evidently universal! Ah, my dear sir, such sorrow as springs from this unbelief is only making work for deeper remorse. It is adding reproach to the reproaches which have already fallen on the Saviour. It is nurturing a feeling as likely to be destructive to your own best interests, as it is dishonourable to him.

See, too, what a mischievous delusion is this under which you are now labouring. While you are brooding over this distress, and feeding the grief that preys upon your peace, you are dis-

posed plaintively to ask, “Why does God permit me to endure this sorrow?” Do you not see that the fault is your own: that it is a sorrow which “worketh death;” which is no part of the means of your salvation, or of your pardon? You attempt to persuade yourself that there is no hope in your behalf, while you gather all your conclusions from a mere moodiness of feeling. Is it upon this criminal state, that you anticipate the pity and compassion of Jesus?

Believe me; a heart penetrated with a sense of its past ingratitude and guilt, and looking to the Saviour for his pardoning mercy, will never be spurned from the seat whence he dispenses it. Flee instantly to the cross of redemption. The Redeemer will never spurn the penitent at the place where, incarnate, he suffered for the deliverance of his sinful creatures from sorrow and death. There resolve to stay: and if the dread of perishing ever steal over you, encourage yourself with the simple language of the poet,

“But should I die with mercy sought,
When I the king have tried,
I there should die, (reviving thought!)
Where ne’er a sinner died.”

But if, on the contrary, you nourish apprehensions, which the whole tenor of Scripture concurs

in reproving ; if, “ wearied with the greatness of your way,” you continue to murmur and repine, the guilt and all its consequences are incurred by your own personal means.

Farewell !

I am, as ever, your's, &c.

LETTER VI.

The propensity to opposite and alternate extremes.—Apprehension of having committed the unpardonable sin.—Explanation of passages supposed to refer to it.—An instance of the dangerous influence of error on this subject.

MY DEAR SIR,

How unhappily are we prone to extremes, in the subjects of eternal interest ! While we are unimpressed with a sense of our condition, we are not only willing to admit the extent of divine mercy, and the sufficiency of the provision for pardon, but we are even disposed to believe them ready at our beck ; and, not infrequently, secretly to fancy our salvation almost necessary to the happiness of our Maker. We merge all his attributes into that fictitious quality, unconditional pity : while we consider its very times and seasons in our own hands. How easily we then overlook every perplexity which can accompany the inquirer, and imagine the space between our mere wish and its object, so short and practicable that all present anxiety is superfluous. But, how is the scene changed, when we obtain some

insight into the moral state of our own hearts! The divine compassion, which appeared so accessible and perhaps so venal, gives place to the scrutiny and requirements of justice. Where is now the belief, which we had so covertly cherished, of a heavenly interest in our favour? Where is the persuasion, founded on we knew not what, that *we* were safe, whatever became of others? They have given way to a sentiment almost as strong,—that *we* are precluded from hope. With such facility do we make the transition from presumption to despair! Our late petty excuses for a neglect of religion, and all those miserable subterfuges to which we loved to resort, give place to new cares, arising from mistakes concerning the character of God, or from misconstrued expressions in his holy word.

Extremes meet. Either presumption or despair may keep the sinner back from salvation; and, while it is not easy to say which of them is the more offensive in the sight of God, we know that either may be cherished without reflecting, at the time, on its moral tendency. Thus, the inquirer may see his past security in its true light; while he is sensible of no guilt in questioning, as he now does, the promises of his Maker, or in limiting the benevolence of Christ. So difficult is it to be aware of the sin which besets

us; and so much more prominent are other sins than our own!

Besides; there is a tendency in the anxious mind to seize on whatever can add to its perplexity; as a diseased appetite longs for what would have been loathed in a state of healthfulness. Hence we account for cares which never ought to harass the awakened sinner; and for contradictions which are inconsistent with a proper approach to Him, who is "the way, and the truth, and the life."

Among these subjects of distress it is not wonderful that the apprehension of having committed the *unpardonable sin* is often included. When the inquirer cannot discover the causes of his failure, and has been occupying his attention with excursive musings, he readily fancies that some secret and mysterious cause is operating against him. Especially, when he reads that there is a "*sin unto death*," a transgression which can never be forgiven, he is not unlikely to appropriate to himself all the horrors and guilt of that terrible evil. If he be not able to recal to mind any act of peculiar atrocity into which he has been led, or any outrageous expression against the authority of heaven; he can, perhaps, remember when he strove against the convictions of his mind, and very possibly did despite unto the Holy Ghost. Or, it may be, that

when he was without conviction himself, he attributed the work of God in other minds to some unhallowed cause ; and now he looks back on his mistake, with all the bitterness of remorseful feeling, and all the terrors of a visible doom. Or, if neither of these be perceptible in his past experience and conduct, he still nourishes an indefinite suspicion that, in some ill-fated hour, he may have sinned beyond the hope of mercy, and unconsciously incurred the penalty of irremissible guilt. In a state of mind agitated by such fears, he is not likely to review the past with all the deliberation that the occasion demands, or to put a fair construction on the difficulties into which he is led. Even the very anxiety which his fears have created, is often attributed to the dire transgression which he imagines himself to have committed ; or more immediately to the spiritual desolation which is supposed to have followed it.

When we add to this, the superstitious dread which often accompanies the mention of this deed of darkness, and which has been increased by public accounts of certain memorable examples, or by instances that are said to have occurred within the memory of some around us, it is not wonderful that suspicion should almost grow into proof. Nor should I be surprised if, in cases where such terrible forebodings have sometimes

engrossed the mind, and no relief had been furnished to the despondency which they occasioned, a dying bed has sometimes disclosed an awful scene of despair: and the evil which existed in the imagination alone, has effectually precluded all effort to obtain divine forgiveness; just as an imaginary disease has as effectually terminated in death, as a disorder that is real and local.*

To allow yourself to be disturbed by vague and indefinite apprehensions is never wise; but to permit them to keep you back from the tendered mercy of God is both folly and sin. Before, then, you admit any conclusion against yourself, carefully travel again over your ground, and at least understand the premises which lead to so sad a conclusion. Are you perfectly assured *what* the unpardonable sin is? If not, any inference against yourself has been taken from the obstacles in your way, or from the state of your own mind. Whatever this awful offence may be, *it* can present no effectual bar to your salvation. But are you aware, that there is not a single question within the circle of theological discussion, which has led to such a variety of opinions,

* On this very solemn and interesting subject, the Editor begs leave to advise the serious reading of a recently published volume, by the Rev. William Orme, "Discourses on the Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit; and on Divine Influence and its Connexion with Instituted Means."

as the one before us? It is a singular fact, that we can enumerate not less than *thirty-two*. And it is not unlikely that, on future inquiry, others might be found as injudicious as any among this number. As it may tend to show you how much uncertainty is connected with the whole question, let me select a portion from the mass of opinions:

“Vilifying the Holy Ghost:” *—“The denial of God in Christ:” †—“An unmeet expression of the Spirit:” ‡—“Final impenitence:” ||—“The blasphemy of infidelity:” §—“Sinning maliciously against the truth:” ¶—“Universal apostasy from God, by which the majesty of God is maliciously opposed:” **—“Opposition to the word of God while convinced of its divine authority:” ††—“Blasphemy in the face of miracles:” ‡‡—These are the opinions of older writers. Modern authors are less divided: but still differ much on the subject. Some have contended that a rare combination of circumstances is required in the commission of this sin. Others insist that, in the present day, it is not possible to be guilty of it under any circumstances. While a few have held up the texts which are supposed to refer to it, as matters of awful warning.

* Epiphanius. † Hilary. ‡ Cyril. || Augustine.

§ Ambrose. ¶ Lyra. ** Beza.

†† Musculus, Calvin, Bucer, and Piscator. ‡‡ Chrysostom.

Some tell us that the unpardonable sin is a denial of Christ under oath, a crime to which persecution exposed many in the early ages of the church. But if this were so, the Apostle Peter must have been guilty of it; for he “began to curse and swear, saying, I know not the man.” And there is reason to believe that the guilt of many impenitent sinners is still more aggravated, in their bold enmity to God, and in giving utterance to language even more daring than that of the perjured disciple.

Some would solve the difficulty by making an imaginary case: “If the two characters, and the different sins, of Peter and Paul were united in one person, this unpardonable guilt would be incurred.”* But this supposition is fanciful in the extreme. A moment’s thought will convince us that no such man exists, as is thus pictured.

Other critics have contended that from the nature of the Hebrew idiom in the gospel of Matthew, we are to understand that the crime in question is not absolutely unpardonable; but only comparatively so, when viewed in connexion with others: and that no other construction than this would be consistent with our Lord’s praying for his enemies on the cross.†

But let us proceed to a cursory examination

* Reynolds.

† See Waterland’s Sermon on Matt. xii. 31, 32.

of those texts which have occasioned the perplexity we are considering. The first occurs in Matthew *—"I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men; but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men. And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come." You will remember that our Saviour had just exercised his miraculous power in the cure of a demoniac. The Pharisees saw that this proof of special and divine authority could not be contravened. Foiled, then, in their efforts, they attempted to destroy the credit of the miracle, by imputing the whole agency to Satan. It was in this that their criminality seems to have consisted; as another Evangelist tells us, "because the Pharisees said, he hath an unclean spirit." The doctrines and work of the Holy Ghost were not only rejected, but maliciously calumniated and imputed to the Prince of Darkness.

Now it is very questionable how near any sin, committed at the present day, can approach to this. It is certain that malicious opposition to the miracles of the Holy Ghost cannot be exhibited: for no such testimony of divine power is

* Chap. xii. 31, 32.

now visible. With respect to the spirit of the threatening itself, the exposition of some other texts, before I close this letter, may perhaps throw some light on it.

The next passage under consideration is in the Epistle to the Hebrews :*—“ For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame.” We must examine these expressions separately.

The persons alluded to were “ once enlightened.” Life and immortality being brought to light, all who had received knowledge of the truth were called “ enlightened,” in distinction from the moral darkness of heathenism. But this illumination, although it might bring some hope to the mind, is not to be confounded with the sanctifying and saving influence of the spirit, the only true hope of the soul. “ Have tasted of the heavenly gift.” The term “ gift ” here, refers to the new gospel state. And “ tasting ” implies so far an examination of it as to induce a conviction, that it was a more excellent state than

* Chap. vi. 4—6.

that in which the subject had been while a Pagan or a Jew. A very similar meaning should be attached to "*the good word of God.*" Being made "*partakers of the Holy Ghost*" is understood by our best expounders, to apply to the possession of those spiritual gifts which were conferred, in the apostolic age, sometimes even on persons who had only an historical or speculative faith. Among these were included the gifts of tongues and prophecy. "*The powers of the world to come,*" were the miracles performed to introduce the gospel dispensation; which the Jews were accustomed to denominate "the age, or world, to come."

Before we examine the remainder of this passage, let me introduce another of similar import: "If we sin wilfully, after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking-for of judgment." * It will assist us in our attempt to understand both these quotations, if we recollect that they were addressed to persons supposed to be familiar with the law of Moses. In that dispensation, you will recollect that there were certain sins for which no provision was made by sacrifice, especially presumptuous transgressions; with respect to which God had said immediately after giving the regulations concern-

* Heb. x. 26, 27.

ing sacrifices, "But the soul that doeth ought presumptuously, whether he be born in the land, or a stranger, the same reproacheth the Lord; and that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Because he hath despised the word of the Lord, and hath broken his commandment, that soul shall utterly be cut off; his iniquity shall be upon him."* With regard to open idolatry, it had been said, "If there be found among you, within any of thy gates which the Lord thy God giveth thee, man or woman, that hath wrought wickedness in the sight of the Lord thy God, in transgressing his covenant, and hath gone and served other gods, and worshipped them, &c."† The punishment of the law in all such cases was death. But are we hence to conclude that there could be no remission of sin, in any case for which no sacrifice had been legally provided? Surely not. Numerous transgressions were pardoned through the sacrifice of Christ, then remaining to be offered. You have examples of this in Aaron, David, and Manasseh; for some of whose sins there was no sacrifice appointed by law. It is in reference to this that the apostle speaks, when he says, of those who reject the atonement of Jesus Christ, that "there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins." His meaning seems to be, that, as there can be

* Numb. xv. 30, 31.

† Deut. xvii. 2—7.

no salvation out of Christ, they must perish who persist in refusing this. But then such is neither more nor less than a case of final impenitence; and it is only as such the awakened sinner ought now to view it.

There is another consideration which should always be kept in mind in reading the awful threatenings of God, and that, too, when they appear, at first sight, entirely absolute: I mean, that all these threatenings are *conditional*. The declaration of Joshua to the children of Israel would seem appalling; "Ye cannot serve the Lord, for he is an holy God; he is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins." Yet the patriarch certainly could not have intended to declare that there was no possible pardon for their sins, if they sought it in a penitent and becoming manner. The same limitation must be preserved, in reading the description of the Redeeming Angel, "Beware of him and obey his voice; provoke him not, for he will not pardon your transgressions."*

It is true, my dear sir, that the language of scripture, respecting apostates, assumes a peculiar awfulness: and it is indeed a melancholy thought that few of them ever reach repentance.

* Ex. xxiii. 20, 21. On this remarkable passage the Editor begs to refer to his "Scripture Testimony to the Messiah," vol. i. pp. 486, 495, second edition.

Yet I would not dare to conclude that their case is always hopeless. We have reason to trust otherwise, even for this wretched and apparently abandoned class, in certain instances. The apostle Paul, in his instructions to Timothy, plainly refers to them; where, after speaking of Hymenæus and Philetus, who had deserted the truth, although they still retained the name of Christianity, he says, “If God peradventure will give them repentance.”* Indeed, of the former of these persons, and of another of the same description, the apostle had said, that he had “delivered them unto Satan;” or, as the expression implies, had banished them from the visible church; not as a matter of mere vengeance, but in order that “they might learn not to blaspheme,” which implies, that they might be led to repentance.

The last text which we will examine on this subject, and which seems less equivocal than either of the preceding, and has perhaps a more formidable aspect than any other in the Bible, is that of the apostle John.† “If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do

* See the whole of this example, 2 Tim. ii. 17—25.

† 1 John v. 16.

not say that he shall pray for it." There is something so terrific in the language, "I do not say that he shall pray for it," that it has often foregathered the despair of an impenitent and remorseful dying hour. We almost fancy before us the wretched subject, singled out by a judicial hand; the frost of the second death, chilling all possible hope in his behalf; and even the christian bidden to look with mute astonishment on the abandoned reprobate. All this appears to be the consequence of a construction very commonly put upon the language before us. And how many impolitic measures has it occasioned! To what ill-advised and rash conclusions has it led, in the minds of some, who have mistaken an active opposition to the cause of Christ for this nameless and desperate crime!

Let me place before you three or four of the most plausible interpretations of this extraordinary passage. The first is, that it is intended as a general direction relative to the subjects of prayer; that we are bound to offer up our petitions for all, excepting those who have committed the unpardonable sin. But this construction supposes the ordinary christian always to know when the unpardonable sin has been committed; which is absurd. And if it be said that the application is only to those who possess the gift of discerning spirits, then it would favour the

inference that this sin could have been committed only in the early ages of the church ; or else the direction, if applicable at the present time, should have been accompanied by some obvious sign by which it might be distinguished.

Another interpretation is ; “ Any transgression obstinately persevered in ; and which, of course, not being repented of, must end in the eternal death of the guilty. This impenitence being known to the ancient christian, from the simple fact that he was not moved by the Holy Ghost to pray for it, he conceived himself forbidden to hope for pardon in behalf of the sinner.” But the truth is, that we are no where encouraged to ask for the remission of unrepented guilt, either for ourselves or others. The utmost we can do, is to entreat that repentance may be given ; and all the rest will then be well. Yet, if the above interpretation were admissible, you could have no personal interest in the case.

Others suppose that the transgressor, having been one who made a public avowal of his faith in Christianity, and thus standing within the pale of the visible church, evinced, by his unholy life, that his profession was hypocritical ; and that, accordingly, the Christian was not to regard him in the light of a brother, or pray for him as such, because he could not plead any of the promises in his behalf. I have only to say that this construc-

tion seems to be rather constrained. Yet if it were just, it furnishes an example of no possible application to the awakened sinner.

The last interpretation which I will mention, is the one which seems to me most consistent with the other portions of scripture, already cited :

You are aware that the primitive church was guarded with peculiar care from the encroachments of vice ; and it was this which so effectually secured its stability and extension. As one means of completing this end, the more flagrant violations of law were punished with visible, and often severe, temporal judgments. It was hence the apostle said to the Corinthians, who had been guilty of most criminal irregularities in the ordinance of the Lord's supper, " For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep," that is, are dead. But, as the gift of healing was conferred on some of these early Christians, it was used in behalf of such as had repented of the sins which brought on the malady. To this the apostle James refers, in a similar case.* I have little hesitation in concluding that the same is the reference in this verse. In that case, the restriction of prayer related only to the particular case of disease in question ; and not in the least to the spiritual condition of the sufferer.

* Chap. v. 14, 15.

I am very confident that the word of God, in all its general representations of character, considers the sinner, while in this world, as always within the range of divine mercy. If there ever have been any particular exceptions it must have been those who, in the apostolic age, after being privileged with extraordinary light, and gifted perhaps with miraculous power, turned traitors to the faith, and openly blasphemed the Holy Ghost. This restriction of prayer was not unlike that of the prophet Jeremiah, in an earlier period of the church; when he was forbidden to ask a reversal of the sentence to captivity, and yet, at the same time, continued to admonish the people, and to pray for their salvation.*

It should be admitted, and the melancholy truth reveals an alarming admonition, that all or any opposition to divine grace, has a tendency to accomplish its own work of ruin in the soul of the opposer. It is not for us to say, how far this tendency may be accompanied by direct spiritual judgments from God. But one thing on this subject is very certain: *No one who has ever sinned beyond the possibility of remission, is painfully convinced of having done so, and yet still lives under the opportunities of the gospel. A seared conscience and an impenitent mind must*

* Compare Jer. vii. 14—16, with Micah vii. 8—19, 20.

invariably attend the fate of the reprobate. The presages of this fate, if any occurred at all, would be faint and few. His calm would be unbroken. A fearful silence of all warning would suffer him to slumber on ; and the hour of his awakening would be in the light of eternity.

An instance of the distressing effects of fear, on this subject, which now occurs to me, may not be out of place. It is one of the many which may tend to shew the consequences of error on a susceptible mind : Mr. L. had enjoyed the privilege of sitting under an able and successful ministry. His heart had been touched ; and, during a remarkable period, in which he saw many of his friends embracing the hope of salvation, his own convictions increased. Not long after, his feelings of impatience became sensitive. His attention was, subsequently, turned from its own proper object to one more nearly connected with our natural selfishness. He ceased to be an inquirer, and became an objector. It is hard to stop here. Opposition succeeded a habit of objecting. An apparent bitterness of prejudice and malevolence of expression were observable, whenever he opened his lips on the subject of religion. Still, the past day of conviction was a memorable time to him. Five years afterwards, he was again aroused to a sense of his danger : and with the alarm came the terrible recollec-

tion of his former conduct. Language which he had uttered, and which appeared nearly allied to blasphemy, returned in fearful freshness to his memory. He accused himself of having committed the unpardonable sin. All efforts to persuade him to the contrary were unavailing. The impression was daily deepening. His mind lost its elasticity, and a moody temperament succeeded. His friends were alarmed. A suspicion was started among them, that his conclusions might be just. This he marked, and laboured to confirm it. He seemed to take a negative satisfaction in stating the desperation of his case, and in watching the fallen countenance of sympathy.

Many months had elapsed, during which he was the subject of religious gossip with some, of a kind of superstitious dread with others, and of fervent prayer with a few of the remainder; when the case was stated to a judicious minister, whom some providence had called into the neighbourhood. He waited on Mr. L., who, far from being averse to any conversation relative to his own state, seemed rather to court it. He was fluent in all the details of time and circumstance, and always ended his narrative with the declaration that he had ceased for ever to pray. After a preparatory interchange of remarks, he was asked, "You believe yourself guilty of the unpardonable sin?"

“ I am sure of it.”

“ In what did the crime consist?”

“ I opposed the work of God.”

“ So did Saul.”

“ I denied Jesus Christ.”

“ So did a disciple afterwards honoured by his Master.”

“ I doubted the power of Jesus Christ, after strong evidence in its favour.”

“ So did Thomas.”

“ What ! are you attempting to prove by such examples that I am a Christian ?”

“ Not at all : I am only inquiring into the nature of your guilt ; and thus far I see no reason for despair.”

“ I have hated God,”—rejoined the self-condemned, “ and openly avowed my enmity in sight of his divine operations.”

“ Thus far your case is lamentable indeed ; but not hopeless still. Our hearts are naturally at enmity with God. And I do not see why the open avowal of this, drawn out by the sight of the law, into visible form, must necessarily and always constitute the guilt of which you accuse yourself.”

“ *I feel* that I am cut off from salvation.”

“ It is difficult to reason against your feelings : but they are no proof on the present subject. Let me inquire whether you desire the pardon of your sins?”

“Assuredly, if it were possible.”

“Do you regret the conduct of which you accuse yourself?”

“Certainly.”

“Do you sincerely desire repentance?”

“I would give the world, if it were mine, to be able to do so.”

“Then it is not possible that you have been guilty to an unpardonable extent: for these are characteristics of a state of mind faithless, but far from being desperate: and they come within the design of the gospel invitations.”

There was something simple and touching in this mode of ministering to a mind diseased; and it produced an effect which, probably, no other process could have accomplished. Mr. L. did not long survive this interview. But his living and dying hours were those of a favoured Christian.

It is, perhaps, hardly fair to speculate on contingencies in such a case as this. But, humanly speaking, had Mr. L. been removed from time, without such providential interference, it would have been with the melancholy conviction in his own, and other minds, that he had been guilty of this fearful evil. Yet, had he gone down without hope to the grave, final unbelief and impenitence would have been the ground of his condemnation, and not the guilt of the unpardonable sin.

Let me pray you, my dear sir, to dismiss this whole subject, as one which, at this time, is not your concern. There is enough before you to engross all your solicitude, without seeking subjects of unnecessary anxiety.

Adieu!

I am very truly, &c.

LETTER VII.

The disposition to cherish discouraging feelings.—Passages of scripture often wrongly interpreted, or misapplied.—Explanations of several.—Luke xiii. 24.—Prov. i. 28.—Hebrews xii. 16, 17.—Hosea iv. 17.

MY DEAR SIR,

I WOULD not say that it is always perverseness in the disposition of the inquirer, which leads him to misapply the language of the scriptures; though there might be some truth in a charge of this nature. The timidity which the importance of the subject may produce in his mind, will easily awaken suspicions against himself: and they may be brought into further activity by any thing which wears the semblance of discouragement. This is their natural effect upon a temper whose bias is sorrowful, and which is so much more readily attracted by difficulties than by the simplicity of the gospel: especially as such a mind is so prone to look for causes of perplexity out of itself, and to fancy their existence where there may be no reason for fear. An accusing conscience is not only distrustful, but is a skilful artificer of its own sorrow.

Some of the scriptural passages which you have noted, are certainly adapted to awaken the inconsiderate, and to promote in us all a diligence to make our calling and election sure. But not one of them was designed to thwart the purpose of the sincere inquirer, or to render more precarious the confidence which he is bound to repose in the Saviour. For proof of this position, let us examine some of those passages which are usually considered as discouraging. We will begin with that in the thirteenth chapter of Luke: "Strive to enter in at the straight gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able."

The difficulty which this text presents, arises from disconnecting it from the subsequent verse: and hence it is concluded, that not all who apply sincerely for salvation will be embraced in the number of the saved. According to this interpretation, the Redeemer's argument in favour of diligence, is drawn from the frequent failure of effort in the awakened sinner: a failure which is attributed to a defect in the manner of seeking, or to a want of lively earnestness and of perseverance.

Now, it is perfectly true that inactivity is wholly inconsistent with success; that fundamentally mistaken notions are equally so; and that he who asks for pardon and mercy, without feeling

the importance of the boon which he solicits, will ask in vain. The word in this passage which we translate “strive,” is a strong figure of speech, importing all that ardour and resolution which distinguished the successful antagonist on the arena, or the victorious soldier on the field of battle : and it intimates that the “straight gate” is surrounded by powerful foes, through whom he is to contend his way. It gives the reason of failure in many, who set out with *apparent* sincerity. But, while it does this, it prejudices no awakened and penitent sinner.

Had the Saviour meant, that persons of the same degree of sincerity might fail or succeed ; and that the sovereignty of God, independently of the desires and exertions of the applicant, or of his faith or repentance, would decide the question of success ; this would have been not only inconsistent with scripture, not only discouraging in the extreme, but remote from our Lord’s apparent design. He was not speaking of a change of heart, or the beginning of a new life. This had been his subject on a former occasion,* when the expression “straight gate” referred to the commencement of the Christian career. But that occasion is not to be confounded, either in its time or circumstances, with the present, in

* Matt. vii. 13.

which the same term has reference to the end of life, the entrance into heaven.

The present passage alludes to a marriage festival, according to the splendid manner and numerous attendance by which it was distinguished in eastern custom ; and during which the wicket, or narrow gate, alone was left open, that the crowd might not intrude, and that none but invited or accepted guests might enter. In such ceremonies, after a given hour, the door was shut, and all ingress became impracticable.

Observe, then, that there is nothing in this language of Jesus Christ, at all implying that any who come to him will be cast out. But if a love of the world keep the sinner from cordially acquiescing in the method of grace, and he is rejected accordingly, the fault is entirely his own ; while the justice of God will be vindicated in his condemnation at the last day ; and that, too, although the excluded sinner may have worn the badge of a profession, and enjoyed all the privileges of light and knowledge.

That passage in Proverbs which you quote, “Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer ; they shall seek me early, but they shall not find me,”* is less disheartening than you

* Prov. i. 28.

imagine. The whole sentence contains a solemn warning to those who are averse from the knowledge of their natural condition, (the great mark of the unregenerate), and who practically despise the overtures of divine mercy: and even then the warning is taken from the final desolation of the impenitent, and not from God's manner of dealing in the present world. The word "early," which obscures the sense, should be exchanged for "earnestly," a translation which conveys a more consistent sense, and is the accessory meaning of the Hebrew expression.

Your next quotation deserves more particular notice; not because it really contains any very serious difficulty in itself, but because the mischievous impressions which a misunderstanding of it has sometimes left, are deep and distressing. "Lest there be any—profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birth-right: for ye know how that, afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected; for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears."*

There is something truly terrifying in the idea of a person deeply regretting his past misconduct, labouring to repent of the evil, but utterly unable to affect his mind with a proper sense of it: and

* Heb. xii. 16, 17.

the picture is the more distressing, when accompanied with the opinion of having forfeited all hope of salvation for some petty present gain; having bartered eternal life, for a momentary gratification, without the possibility of revoking the contract; and that, too, when the folly had been the impulse of passion; or, still more excusably, occasioned by the cravings of hunger. It is this representation which often appears before the mind of the alarmed sinner, from the passage cited, and attaches an arbitrary precariousness to the salvation of the soul. And if, in addition to this, the providential dealings of God towards him, in times past, have been remarkable, a comparison with the case of Esau is easily instituted, and the most poignant reflections are gathered from it. He can possibly recollect when he was penetrated with a feeling sense of his lost condition; when, for a season, the importance of religion occupied and filled his thoughts. He can recollect, too, how he abandoned the inquiry under the influence of worldly considerations; or, it may have been, for some short-lived pleasure.—Desirous as he may now be to renew those impressions, he finds it not possible to recall the same feelings: and sensible of guilt and ill-desert, he bitterly laments his inability to reach a state of mind, which he considers irrecoverably lost. He fancies himself unable to “find any place of repent-

ance, though sought carefully with tears :” and he sees in Esau, an instance so closely resembling his own, that hope dies within him as he contemplates it ; and he believes the only alternative now before him to be, either a return to the world, or a fruitless brooding over his lost condition. Sad choice of evils, each fatal to his eternal happiness !

That it is possible to “ seek a place of repentance carefully with tears,” without being ever able to comply with the primary requisite to salvation, believing repentance or penitent faith,* supposes that irremediable state which distinguishes none but the lost. Yet the apprehension of such a state has more than once, to my own knowledge, been produced in the mind by the text we are now considering. Nor is it surprising that it should be so, when we consider the pointed and animated manner in which this language seems to describe the past and the present state of the backslider.

The simple truth however is, that the verses before us have no relation whatever to the state of the inquirer. The apostle is addressing professed Christians ; and he presents an example of the danger of departing from the truth as it is in

* See the late venerable and judicious Mr. Scott’s “ Discourse on Repentance ;” one of the cheapest and best human compositions ever given to the world. *Ed.*

Jesus, and of exchanging the high privileges of the faithful for any temporary advantages. A *profane* person is one who lightly esteems, or despises, sacred things. Such was Esau. His birthright, which, according to the economy in which he lived, held peculiar religious honours, (not to mention its legal claim to the larger portion of the inheritance,) he bartered for a brief present indulgence. No excuse could palliate this conduct: for it evidently implied contempt of a divinely conferred privilege. Now, of what was it that he repented?—Of his gross sin in the sight of God? Not at all. He regretted his folly: and sought “a place of repentance,” *in his father’s mind*; that is, he endeavoured to procure a reversal of his father’s decision respecting the blessing; and even that not immediately, but forty years after the transaction. Also, this regret was not only unavailing from the late hour in which it occurred, during the whole interval to which he had continued impenitent, and from the irrevocable investiture of the blessing in another, but in its very nature it was devoid of any moral value. All Esau’s vehemency and tears arose from considerations completely selfish, and inconsistent with sincere penitence of heart. He sought nothing from his offended God, and he retained a feeling of rancour towards his brother. Besides; it was the pique of pride, the wounding

of ambition, under which he smarted. The object of his desire was no spiritual blessing, nothing religious; it was to have the grant transferred to himself, "Be Lord over thy brethren, and let thy mother's sons bow down to thee." Had he, from the heart, before God, sought repentance, and earnestly desired the special blessings of salvation, there was nothing that could have prevented his obtaining them.

In all this you see no parallel to the case of the awakened sinner. The circumstances, the object sought, the kind of repentance desired, as the apostle applies them, give an admonition to the members of the visible church, by a very plain inference; but they present no discouragement to the inquirer. The lesson which they furnish to sinners in general, is by analogy and inference; the hazard of delay, or, the great importance of improving the present moment.

Let me now say, that the uneasiness which you have entertained on this subject, should lead you to reflect on the duty of taking every passage of scripture in connexion with its broad and general truths. The word of God will illustrate, but never contradict, itself. A detached sentence may fill the heart with terror, when it never was intended to do so. But carry it to the light of some other truth, and you will see that there is

nothing to deter the returning sinner, but every thing to encourage him.

You adduce the language of Jehovah by the prophet, "Ephraim is joined to idols; let him alone;"* as an evidence that some may be sentenced to a judicial exclusion from hope, notwithstanding any desire on their part to return to God. But surely, he who is "joined to his idols," who is obstinately bent on pursuits and pleasures dishonourable to reason and religion, inimical to spirituality, and forbidden, directly or indirectly by God, can have no sincere desire for holy enjoyments.

Moreover, if these words had been designed to indicate to the rebellious people, that their doom was now sealed, and that no further effort should be made for their good, the curse would have carried its own sign along with it, a cessation on the part of God to break in upon their insensibility. But the prophet continues to expostulate, with pathos and earnestness, "O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God; for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity. Take with you words, and return unto the Lord. Say unto him, Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously."† All this pleading is clearly inconsistent with the idea of a state of abandoned hopelessness. It announces

* Hosea iv. 17.

† Chap. xiv. 1, 2.

the unretracted offer of pardon, on condition of genuine repentance. The admonition in this passage, then, was not intended to intimate that the doom of the people was sealed. Nor was it a prohibition to the ministers of the sanctuary from preaching to that rebellious race; or they would have obeyed it. The whole history and the connexion of the text plainly shew that the sentence was a command to the people of Judah, to refrain from all unnecessary commerce with the idolatrous nation of Ephraim: "Let them alone. Though Israel sin, yet let not Judah offend." It implied the danger arising from evil communication, and, particularly, communication with those guilty of so infectious a sin as that of idolatry. It was the application of a maxim of daily use, and of the greatest importance.

That God may, and sometimes does, judicially leave men to a perverse temper and a hardened mind, is a truth, which, awful as it is, cannot be denied. But the awakened sinner is in a situation directly the reverse of this. His sense of danger is neither accidental nor nugatory. The Holy Spirit has appealed to him: and that appeal has aroused him. In doing this, it could not be the intention of the Creator to remind him of his doom, only with the view to leave him in his wretchedness. In a case of utter hopelessness, that deep slumber of all susceptibility, which is so

portentous to the observer, remains unnoted in the mind of the subject himself; while self-flattery, indifference, or infidelity, prevent any discovery of his condition.

This dreadful doom does not consist in the infliction of any positive evil on the part of God; nor may it be in the withdrawing of the means of grace. For if the lost soul could, as I have elsewhere said, ascribe his perdition exclusively to an absolute divine determination, his sufferings would be mitigated, if not removed. But the very reverse of this, the consciousness of his personal guilt, and exclusive blame, will be the keen aggravation of his endless wretchedness.

The only proof that any one is in a hopeless condition, consists in his perverse continuance in unbelief and impenitence. As long as he so remains, there is every reason for apprehension; and the more so, in proportion to the length of the time and the extent of his privileges. Should he die in this state, we have the assurance of his ruin. But, the moment we have evidence of his awakening to a sense of sin and repenting of it, our grounds of alarm are removed: and he may be satisfied that God is fully as willing to accept of him as of any other sinner on earth. It is our duty to take warning from the fact that thousands die with a seared conscience, to whom during life every opportunity was offered. But if

it be our own earnest desire to escape such a doom as justice dispenses to them, and if we adopt the means for that end appointed by God, we may dismiss all fears of being included among their number: fully assured, as we should be, that the loss of the soul must be a fault of our own.

Once more, my dear sir, let me beseech you to cease harassing yourself with imaginary difficulties. Say no more with the sorrowing women who were seeking their Lord, "Who shall roll us away the stone?" The stone is already gone. No impediment is in our way to salvation, but such as we place there ourselves. The fountain of mercy is unlocked; and the path to it is as open and plain as infinite love can make it.

When you take up the holy volume, see that you do not render it "a snare and a trap." Let no imputed inconsistency startle you: you may be assured that the discrepancy is only in semblance. Remember that you are not called on to reconcile the critical difficulties of scripture, but to believe its sun-beam truths, and comply with its divinely gracious invitations. Once admitted into your heart, the declarations of heaven will reconcile themselves. "Be not afraid, only believe," is the language of the blessed Redeemer himself.

I am yours, &c.

LETTER VIII.

Perplexity in reading the word of God.—Complaint of the want of personal application.—Natural aversion from the Bible.—Mistaken expectations.—An impious practice.—Failure arising from listlessness in reading.—Want of consideration.—Forgetting that God is the Author.—Looking for an extraneous something.—How the Holy Spirit imparts the right meaning.—Duty of becoming familiar with the plan of salvation.—Caution relative to reading other books.—Concluding advice.

MY DEAR SIR,

ONE of your expressions merits particular notice : “ *Although I am confident that the Bible is the word of God, and that it is the ordinary means, in his hands, of relieving the spiritual wants of his creatures, yet it appears not of the least avail to me. It meets none of my difficulties. It presents no personal application to my own mind. There is in it nothing that is suitable to my exigencies. I have thought a thousand times, that I should rejoice to see a plain delineation of myself; something in a tangible form, to fix and rivet my attention. It is the reverse of all this that I complain of. Every thing appears confused and indefinite, as it regards my own situation. In*

some portions of this book I can discover beauties which my judgment approves ; and I can take some little interest in its historical records. But, although I task myself in hopes of some development, or some discovery not yet made, I shut it again and again, as much in the dark as ever."

Sad complaint of a soul distressed with a sense of its loneliness, and sighing for an object suited to its necessities ! How great is the disappointment which it indicates ! To how many murmurs does it give rise ! How often does it create a wish that the bible were not what it is ! But where is the fault ? Certainly not in the divine book itself ; but in the mind of the reader. In evidence of this, we might mention the different impressions which may be made on the same mind at different times, and under different circumstances. The scriptures are not always the same to the Christian himself. In seasons of coldness their energy and interest are, in a great measure, lost. Conviction of their intrinsic value and individual reference will indeed continue : but it is conviction from past, not from present experience. Also in a mind destitute of any spiritual taste, the effect left by a perusal of the sacred pages may, and does, vary, both in degree and character. The same may be asserted of any piece of intelligence, which shall be of equal value to ten persons to whom it is communicated, and yet the

effect shall not be precisely the same upon any two of them.

It must be admitted as a universal truth, that the natural understanding has no relish for the spiritualities of the gospel. A man of no spiritual taste or sensibility may not only entertain some repugnance to its phraseology, or the singularity of its diction, (a fault, if it be one, which arose from the state of the age in which our translation was made, as well as from a subject without analogy,) but he may regard it as something so mystical in its character, and so different from his own ideas of religion, as to produce an aversion which he is little disposed to repress. Habit and education may, in certain cases, and to a certain degree, qualify this repugnance: and a sense of duty, or a negative kind of veneration for what is divine, may carry the effect somewhat further. Yet, without an acquired taste for spiritual things, there can be none of those peaceful feelings which are the legitimate fruits of the holy word in the renewed soul.

But, admitted as all this may be on the part of the inquirer, it furnishes no solution to his most pressing questions. ‘If he cannot enter with all that freedom into the comforts of the gospel, so fully avowed by the growing Christian; if there be no delight for him in pondering the testimonies of God; why does he not find something suited to

his own case, in a revelation expressly intended to be universal, something adapted to relieve an anxiety which its own truths have occasioned? Perhaps the following remarks may furnish an answer to the question. The convicted sinner is usually disposed, on his first alarm, to resort to the bible for light and relief; and he is right in doing so. But he is not unapt to open its pages with expectations which can never be justified by success. He looks for some instantaneous operation upon his mind, perceptible in itself and miraculous in its nature. He has, perhaps, heard of the wonderful influence thus produced upon others, and he readily anticipates the same on his own behalf. Something is immediately to occur worthy of the power of the DIVINE WORD. Some energetic passage is to carry its force, at once, to the heart, with light and life. He reads. No such result ensues. And the disappointment changes the attitude of his thoughts, and the nature of his impressions.

Now the cause of this disappointment is obvious. His mind had been occupied with fanciful expectations, and the proper bearing of the truths which he read was suffered to escape it. A miraculous energy was anticipated from language, *without its reaching him by the ordinary channel of reflection and comparison.* This is a perversion of the design of the scriptures: and it

was no wonder that it was productive of no benefit to the heart or to the mind. Whatever extraordinary events of this kind may have occurred in the lives of others, (and not a few of them have been the offspring of a heated imagination,) they should never form the object of our own expectations. The dealings of the Holy Spirit are not likely to be inconsistent with what is suited to the state and faculties of man as an intelligent and intellectual creature. Depend upon it, any expectation of miraculous influence, as the ground of consolation or as the rule of practice, is indicative of some radical defect. Here the hope is not placed upon any thing in the word of God itself, but, virtually, on the expected influence, whatever it may be. This is a regard to neither reason nor revelation; but it may be the effect of that superstition to which a weak mind is ever prone; and from which an intellect of even greater strength is not always exempted. And if there be any thing, above all others, most adapted to promote an unhallowed enthusiasm, it is this expectation.

I have known others who looked for no miraculous effect on their feelings, and yet who stretched their expectations to a point even more absurd and injurious. These persons, in the midst of distressing fears, have resolved to dismiss their apprehensions, or to change them into despair,

by an appeal to which they were confident of an answer. For this purpose they have resolved, that, on opening the bible, the first passage should be taken as the answer from God respecting their future fate. An instance is now presented to my own recollection of this baneful trifling with the hidden things of God.

It was that of a female, who had suffered a morbidness of feeling to weaken both her sense of duty and her judgment. In an unhappy moment, she had resolved to take the first verse which met her eye as her answer from heaven. The experiment failed ; for the verse was a portion of genealogy. The next trial presented a sentence quite as incapable of leading to any decision. The third produced a word of reproof to the impenitent sinner. This was deemed conclusive. The former failures were considered as an indication of a reluctance on the part of her Maker to disclose her fate ; and this idea strengthened the conviction that a final answer had been given. The shock, which succeeded this supposed discovery, was followed by a gradual and growing indifference to the concerns of her soul. Happily, after some years, these serious impressions returned ; and the subject of them is now, we have reason to believe, an eminent Christian. But to this day she does not cease to lament the presumption which so long kept her

back from the Redeemer; nor does she ever mention the transition without emotion, in recollecting the awful danger to which it exposed her, and the criminal unbelief and presumption in which it originated.

The impiety and absurdity of such a practice will plainly appear, when we recollect how diametrically it is opposed to *the prescribed will* of God, to whom alone secret things belong. We have no right to seek for supernatural evidence of our condition. This is to be ascertained only by the real character of the heart and the life. Any supposed satisfaction which can ever be obtained in this forbidden way, will usually be unaccompanied with a single mark of grace. The heart will continue unaffected; and the disposition and temper will undergo no favourable change. All the gratitude which may arise in the bosom is the product of a selfish feeling; and will be in no wise connected with a love to the true character of God. The proper source of our comfort should be found in the fitness of the word to our wants, and not in the particular state of our minds.

A third reason, why the bible continues a sealed book in the hands of many, is to be found in the listlessness with which they turn over its pages. We should imagine that one, who is deeply impressed with a sense of his danger, would exert all his powers to obtain *the real and genuine mean-*

ing of what he believes to be the will of his God. Such, however, is not the fact. The very uneasiness or distress, which drove him to seek a remedy in the scriptures, frequently diverts his attention from them. His thoughts are confused. Or, if they are concentrated on any point, it is that of his own particular situation. It is thus he reads chapter after chapter, hardly knowing the nature of the subject before him : and when the task is, for a season, relinquished, not a trace is left in the memory. There is a strong temptation to such abstraction of mind ; not only when we resort to the word of God for relief under temporal affliction, at which time the subject of our sorrow often usurps the place in our reflections which the remedy should take, but even when apprehensions of danger to our souls have induced us to apply to the bible. Against this evil I would seriously caution you. The consequences which result at the time are not all that ensue. This inattention repeated, easily grows into a habit ; and thus, without being sensible of it, the inquirer nullifies one of the very means of grace. Have you never detected yourself in this default ? Have you not sometimes closed this life-giving volume, without being able to recollect a single perfect idea which it might have conveyed to your understanding ?

Another reason, why all expectation from the

sacred record fails the inquirer, consists in the impatience often attendant on his situation; especially where the natural temperament is ardent and sanguine. I refer to the practice of turning eagerly and hastily from one passage to another, or from one part of the volume to another, without waiting to canvass the meaning of any. I do not mean here, as in a former case, that the object looked for is that which shall produce a sudden and miraculous effect. The reader, in this instance, is rather in pursuit of something descriptive of his present peculiar feelings; and yet he does not wait long enough to ponder on any thing, so as to ascertain its meetness to his condition. He may not, as in the case first mentioned, expect a wonder to be wrought by an expression found at random, and made instrumental of comfort to him, foreign from its original design, or not, as may be: but he expects that whatever is adapted to the condition of his mind, will appear so at a glance.

That some parts of the bible are not fitted to meet his cares is very certain; for relief to the mourner, or instruction to the convicted, was but one of the great ends for which it was intended by its Divine Author. But it is equally certain that no part can effect the purpose desired, ordinarily, without serious thought on the part of the reader. Surely the man who is credibly informed

that a certain document contains a clause which materially affects his own interest, will weigh well each clause as he reads it. His attention will be arrested by every part which is not obviously distinct from his own concerns. How much rather should the awakened sinner examine the purport of the sacred pages, with the deepest reflection and the utmost care!

Others, again, miss their aim by forgetting the nature and character of the sacred book, even while engaged in its perusal. This may be of serious consequence; and must necessarily retard the end they have in view.

Never cease to remember, my dear sir, that the instruction you are receiving as you study the bible, is directly from God himself; from Him who is able to make it effectual to your salvation. It is a solemn thought, which should occur to every reader, that it is *Jehovah that speaks*. The more deeply we can impress this upon our minds, while we hold the volume before us, the more confident may we be of success in our inquiry. Indeed it is from a sense of this, that we should hope to derive the virtues of the divine word. An infidel of my acquaintance, in looking over the pages of the bible, attempted to keep in mind the *supposition* that the Creator was its author, merely with a design to discover the effect it might produce on his understanding. Now, as it

is sometimes possible for a lively fancy to produce, for a moment, the effects of truth itself, it was so here. Under the idea of divine authority, this reader saw something admirably adapted to the relation which man, as a dependent creature, sustains towards his Creator. Conviction of his own danger, and, subsequently, the knowledge of Jesus Christ, succeeded what was intended to have been a mere experiment on the imagination.

You, my dear friend, need no proof that the bible is of divine authority. Yet it is very possible for you to keep this essential truth too far from your sight, and thus to lose the benefits which it is adapted to convey.

One more error worthy of notice, is that of looking for a meaning in the word of God which it was never designed to give: an expectation of a hidden something, to be brought to light by the Holy Spirit, through the medium of the divine language: or, in other words, of a certain additional quality to be communicated, by that powerful agent, to what the inquirer is reading. I have known persons to wait for this without taking any pains to comprehend what they were perusing. An erroneous apprehension of this kind may be an effectual preventive to success. "The office of the Holy Spirit," to use the words of another, "is not to make known to us any truths which are not already contained in the bible; but

to make clear to our understandings the truths which are contained in it. He opens our understandings to understand the scriptures. The word of God is the instrument by which the Spirit worketh. He does not tell us any thing that is out of the record ; but all that is within it he sends home with clearness and effect upon the mind. He does not make us wise above that which is written, but he makes us wise up to that which is written. When a telescope is directed to some distant landscape, it enables us to see what we could not otherwise have seen ; but it does not enable us to see any thing which has not a real existence in the prospect before us."

As to the question, "whether in the act of teaching us the meaning of the scriptures, the Spirit imparts the necessary information by a direct communication to our minds," let me answer you in the language of an elegant writer of the present day : "A man that is born blind, if placed in the centre of the most attractive scenery that nature ever exhibited, can see no objects. There are the objects ; there is also the medium of vision. If it should please the Almighty to open his eyes, he will first discern them indistinctly, afterwards more clearly ; and when more accustomed to the exercise of his newly-acquired faculty of sight, he will be able to trace their forms, to distinguish their colours, and to make a

correct calculation of their relative distances. He will, when his eyes are open, see no object which did not exist when he was blind ; and when he does see them, it will be through the medium of *his own eye*, though for the capacity of vision he is indebted to a supernatural cause. So in reference to the Spirit of God. He gives to us the power of spiritual discernment, but that power is exerted *through the medium of our own judgment.*"* The Spirit opened the eyes of the apostles to see clearly the meaning of their ascended Master's instructions ; many of which they had forgotten ; and of none of which they had possessed a right understanding before. It is in the same manner that he operates in the present day : and until he do so, the gospel will be, as it respects our main object, a dead letter to the most gifted of mankind.

Such are some of the causes of an utter failure, in many instances, in the attempt to find relief in the word of God. Where any of these exist, such a failure should as certainly be expected as any effect is looked for from its proper cause. It is hence that we sometimes hear the awakened sinner declaring that his difficulties, instead of being removed, are multiplied ; his anxiety, instead of being gratified in its demands, is baf-

* Spirit and Manners of the Age.

fled. This is distressing in the extreme. But he should not have forgotten that, while the illumination of the Holy Spirit is necessary to a saving understanding of the scriptures, the reader is bound to use all the means of acquiring that light; and to avoid every thing that could possibly impede it.

When I say that it is the inquirer's duty to use all means of acquiring spiritual light, I refer not only to the exercise of prayer, which should accompany all his own exertions, but to the duty of making himself conversant with the plan of salvation. That God may, and sometimes does bless his holy word, without clear and discriminating views on this subject, especially where there is no opportunity of acquiring them, is very certain. But, for the most part, it will be found that the divine assistance is furnished in proportion to our own active and sincere desires; and to our efforts to obtain distinct apprehensions of the truth as it is in Christ. Where these are wanting, the hope of acceptance and pardon, even though obtained, with all the comfort which attends it, is not only liable to fluctuations, but is even uncertain in its tenure. Trifling changes in outward circumstances, or in the animal spirits, may bring back a despondency which the prayer of faith had dissipated, unless the object of that faith be kept before the mind; an end which we can always

accomplish the more readily as our views are more intelligent. It was a good remark of an eminent Christian on his death-bed, that the calm and quiet of mind which he had so much enjoyed during life, arose, “not so much from a greater measure of grace than other Christians had, or from an immediate witnessing of the Spirit; but because he had a more clear understanding of the covenant of grace than many others; having studied and preached it so many years.”*

During a period of anxiety, when the word of God seems to afford no consolation to the inquirer, there is a strong temptation to rove abroad in search of something to meet difficulties and feelings, which are not then met by the sacred volume. It is indeed true that many excellent works of pious divines may assist him in part of his perplexities. But I have sometimes had reason to fear that an undue dependence on these had impeded the progress of the reader. I have said an *undue dependence*; for there is always some hazard of this, when the language of holy writ has discouraged his efforts to understand its meaning. Guard against this temptation. Remember that all, in these works, which could be of value in your own case, is derived from the

* Brooks's Cabinet, p. 113.

bible itself. And whatever blessing may rest upon a prayerful perusal of them, is from the fact that they are a species of ministration of the word. This is the fountain-head, from which all else are but so many streams, liable to a greater or less degree of impurity, as they pass through distant grounds.

And now, my friend, before I close this letter, I cannot forbear expressing a fear that the remarks I have made may lead to an error in practice ; and thus, by detaining you from the great end in view, defeat my own purpose. Let me beseech you, then, not to wait for any given degree of knowledge before you discharge the primary duty of making an unreserved surrender of yourself to Christ. Clear and full perceptions of divine truth are indeed necessary to evangelical and substantial peace. But you know enough to understand that God demands your whole heart at once. While you withhold this, all else is a fruitless form. Renounce, then, yourself, and all that is of human expectation : and while you do so, be it your prayer, “ Enlighten thou mine eyes that I may behold the wonderful things contained in thy law !”

Very truly,

Yours, &c.

LETTER IX.

The folly of expending time in attempting to reconcile difficult passages.—The duty of diligence in examining the proper application of the truth.—The question, “What part of the bible shall I read?”—Quotations.—Application of a parable.—A personal appeal to Christ directed in scripture.—Conclusion.

MY DEAR SIR,

IN order to obtain a right understanding of the word of God, it is by no means necessary that you should engage your mind in endeavouring to elucidate its difficult passages, or to reconcile its apparent contradictions. This would be an employment very distinct from your present purpose; and not unlikely to throw hinderances in your way. The mind of that man has a strong bias to scepticism, who insists on having every difficulty satisfactorily explained, before he will apply the sacred truths to himself. There is very little sincerity in his desires for spiritual peace, and no very deep sense of either his guilt or his danger. Thousands are partakers of the heavenly blessing, who are far from being versed in these matters, and have very little curiosity about them. The

convinced sinner has not time for such an occupation ; and if he had, its influence is unsalutary. He whose peace is made with his God, might indeed employ a portion of his leisure in such a pursuit ; but even then, the engagement should be secondary to the study of practical and spiritual truths, or the plan of salvation as unfolded in the gospel. But, until that great end is completed, it is a wide departure from the line of duty to exercise our diligence in any thing not closely connected with matters of the heart. You know that it is very possible to engross our attention with portions of the bible which may have no tendency to furnish spiritual light, and which can in no way illustrate the important question before us. True conviction of sin, and evangelical repentance, arise from another quarter. I should entertain as much hope, and indeed more, in the attempt to convince an infidel by the simplest truths of the gospel, than by the best chain of reasoning, to establish its authenticity : for even the highest success in such an effort may bring him very little nearer to its saving doctrines. I am equally sure, too, that the most complete success of the inquirer, in his attempt to reconcile the difficult passages of the bible, whatever self-complacency or pleasure may follow, will end in little or no moral good upon his mind. In the meantime this diversion of his thoughts from the

grand object of inquiry, is attended with a chilling and deleterious influence on his affections: and thus is the sacred book rendered an instrument, not of deepening his impressions, but of erasing them altogether.

The following direction may be of importance. Whenever, in the course of reading a practical or spiritual part of the bible, you discover any thing which appears to convey an imperfect meaning, or presents no defined idea to your mind, ponder it well. Do not suffer it to escape your recollection without extracting something from it. Never discard, as too abstruse, what on a little reflection may appear rich in meaning. It is attention to such a rule as this, which comprises a profitable reading of the word. A single sentence made the subject of deep thought, and rendered part of the materials of prayer, is worth whole chapters of that more general attention, which we commonly give to other books.

All opposition, or repugnance, which the inquirer may feel to the language or ideas of scripture, should constrain him to greater importunity in prayer; as it proves, more fully, his need of divine assistance. Depend upon it, there is nothing in the whole progress of the awakened sinner's experience, which is not adapted, if he fairly consider it, to teach him the evils of his unrenewed state, and the duty of his entire de-

pendence on God. Instead, then, of disheartening him in his pursuit, all the difficulties he may find, ought, by demonstrating to him the necessity of a radical change, to conduct him to that acceptable frame of mind, with which he cannot approach a throne of grace in vain. But of this, more hereafter.

The question which you ask—"What part of the sacred volume do you recommend to my particular attention?" is one which is very often proposed; and occurs very naturally to the mind of an inquirer who is eager to reach some defined point, on which he desires to reflect with fixedness of thought. But it is a question not easily answered. Nor am I by any means sure that a particular direction is always advisable. The great variety of cases which are presented by the tempers and circumstances of different persons, would render any minute direction inexpedient. The best general advice which could be given, would perhaps, be, to become familiar with those portions which describe the sinfulness of our nature; the character of the Being with whom we have to do; and the way of pardon and reconciliation. Convinced as the inquirer may be of his depravity and guilt, he cannot be too sensible of it, as the ground of his condemnation. A just knowledge of the divine character will deepen this impression, and give it a definite form.

While, at the same time, a distinct comprehension of the way of salvation, as it is revealed in the cross of Christ, is indispensable to produce that humble and penitent frame of mind, without which there can be no true submission, and until we have attained which all our cares will be unavailing.

In regard to *the natural state of man*, let me request you to examine, and apply, with care, the following passages, in connexion with those which are parallel. It is of little consequence that I have not disposed them in order ; but it is of vast importance that here, and in all other instances of examining divine truth, you lay aside every preconceived notion of your own ; and exercise all the candour which a subject of eternal life and death demands at your hands.

“ The imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth. Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean ? Not one. What is man that he should be clean ; and he which is born of a woman that he should be righteous ? The Lord looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand and seek God. They are all gone aside, they are altogether become filthy ; there is none that doeth good, no, not one. Corrupt are they, and have done abominable iniquity. This is an evil among all things that are done under the sun, that there is one

event unto all: yea, also the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead. Behold I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good and sinneth not. Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil. Wherefore as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin, and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned. Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past, in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath even as others. The whole world lieth in wickedness. The world hateth me, because I testify of it that the works of it are evil. The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”*

On the *fulness of pardon through the Redeemer*,

* Gen. viii. 21. Job. xiv. 4. xv. 14—16. Ps. xiv. 1—3. liii. 1—3. Eccles. ix. 3. Ps. li. 5. Eccles. vii. 20. viii. 11. Rom. i. 21, 23, 27, 29. v. 8, 10, 12. Eph. ii. 1—3. 1 John v. 19. John vii. 7. Rom. viii. 7. 1 Cor. ii. 14. Eph. iv. 17, 18.

meditate upon the following : “ He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him ; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray: we have turned every one to his own way ; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. In that day there shall be a fountain opened, to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, for sin and for uncleanness. Be it known unto you, therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins. In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace. Who gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world, according to the will of God and our Father. This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. For I delivered unto you, first of all, that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures. So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many ; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time. For, by one offering, he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness : and ye know that he was mani-

fested to take away our sins. Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins should live unto righteousness.*

Yet that all this may be of no avail to us without divine aid, is fully affirmed: "Man's goings are of the Lord; how can a man then understand his own way? Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then may ye also do good that are accustomed to do evil. All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him. A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven. No man can come unto me except the Father, which hath sent me, draw him. Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God. For by grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God.†

But that God willeth the salvation of the sinner, and tendereth his own blessing to the sincere penitent, is obvious from the following testimo-

* Is. liii. 5, 6. Zech. xiii. 1. Acts xiii. 38. Eph. i. 7. Gal. i. 4. 1 Tim. i. 15. 1 Cor. xv. 3. Heb. i. 3. ix. 28. x. 14. 1 John i. 7—9. iii. 5. 1 Pet. ii. 24.

† Prov. xx. 24. Jer. xiii. 23. Matt. xi. 27. John iii. 27. vi. 44, 65. John xv. 4, 5. viii. 43. 2 Cor. iii. 5. Eph. ii. 8.

nies : “ Turn ye at my reproof ; behold, I will pour out my Spirit upon you, I will make known my words unto you. I have not spoken in secret, in a dark place of the earth : I said not unto the seed of Jacob, Seek ye me in vain. Look unto me and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth ; for I am God, and there is none else. Incline your ear and come unto me ; hear and your soul shall live. Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts ; and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him ; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. As I live, saith the Lord, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked ; but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn ye, turn ye, from your evil ways ; for why will ye die ? For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord God. Wherefore turn yourselves, and live ye. O Israel, thou hast destroyed thyself, but in me is thy help. Turn ye to the strong hold, ye prisoners of hope : even to-day do I declare that I will render double unto thee. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled. I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance. Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and

learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls: for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost. If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely. And the Spirit and the bride say, Come, and let him that heareth say, Come; and let him that is athirst, come: and whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.”*

That God sincerely and justly charges their failure upon sinners themselves, is the current testimony of scripture: “Repent and turn yourselves from all your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your ruin. Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby ye have transgressed, and make you a new heart and a new spirit: for why will ye die? He sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden

* Prov. i. 23. Is. xlv. 19, 22. lv. 1—3, 6, 7. Ez. xxxiii. 11. xviii. 32. Hos. xiii. 9. Zech. ix. 12. Matt. v. 6. ix. 12, 13. xi. 28, 30. Luke xix. 10. John vii. 37, 38. 1 Tim. i. 16. ii. 3, 4. Rev. iii. 18, 20. xxi. 6. xxii. 17.

to the wedding: and they would not come. This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. Ye will not come unto me, that ye may have life.”*

To all this, and the parallel passages, let me add the suggestion, that it would be well to study, attentively, each of the particulars in the parable of the prodigal son. I have already had occasion to advert to this, by way of illustration. But it furnishes so rich and profitable a subject for serious thought, such prominent points of self-examination, and so fine an insight into the relative attitudes of the penitent and his God, that I cannot omit recommending it to your particular notice.

The subject of the story was a *wanderer far from his father*. He was *destitute of every thing* that could satisfy the cravings of an immortal spirit. What a lively description of the natural man! His efforts to obtain food were vain. And how fruitless are the best devices to satisfy the longings of the soul! “No man gave unto him.” Who *can* relieve him? All trust in an arm of flesh must end in disappointment. Neither his own works, nor sympathy, nor pity, are found to avail him. “*He came to himself.*” What a discovery he made of his forlorn condition!

* Ezekiel xviii. 30, 31. Matt. xxii. 3. xxiii. 37. John iii. 19. viii. 45, 46. v. 40.

What a sensation of solitariness and abandonment, is that which now occupies the bosom of the dependent creature! He is alone. Help and hope are far from him. There is not within the compass of language a more emphatic sentence than this—“*he came to himself.*” What a host of reflections does it bring to the mind! The past, the present, and even the future—how they unite in carrying their gatherings of sorrow together! And what a flood of light do they pour into the dark chambers of that *self* to which he came! Here is reason, most abundant, for all that loathing of his condition which ensues in the mind of the sinner, under conviction of sin. And then the sense of shame in remaining from his father’s house—his personal ingratitude—his abuse of mercies—his base prostitution of the means of grace—how admirably are all these reflections adapted to sink him in the dust! It is in this state of distress, that he recalls to mind the ability of his neglected parent to relieve him; and he sees the fitness of the cheering invitations of the gospel to his own condition. Instead of being exalted by the thought that all may yet be well with him, or elated in dwelling on the tendered kindness of his parent, the very thought of parental favour sinks him lower; the legitimate effect, on a generous mind, of kindness from the injured party. In this humility he would be fed as a

servant; he would take the lowest condition; he aspires to nothing of self-exaltation. An active resolution succeeds these reflections, “*I will arise, and go to my father.*” He does not lie still and bemoan his condition. He does not wait for future facilities. A sense of starvation will not permit the sufferer to speculate on frivolous matters. Nor does he inquire into any of the details which are unessential to his purpose. “*He arose.*” “*A great way off*” he was seen—met—greeted—and embraced. There is something affecting, too, in the simple statement of the interview. To the humble and heartfelt confession of the son, the father gives no other answer than that of an order to clothe the tattered youth with a garment of honour, and to prepare a festival of rejoicing for his famishing child. And then how the feelings of the parties act on each other! The sense of shame and guilt, and the humility of the son, awaken the pity of a compassionate parent: and the tenderness of the father increases the self-condemnation of his offspring. Was ever description more true to nature?

One consideration we should never forget; for a recollection of it will prevent that confusion respecting the use of the promises, which is so very general: I mean that every promise, or invitation, is given through the Saviour; not merely that all salvation is the purchase of his blood, but

that, in the view of the promises themselves, our eye is to be directed to him, and our application to be made personally to himself. His own language is, "Come unto *me*, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and *I* will give you rest. Him that cometh to *me* *I* will in no wise cast out."

After all, my dear sir, it is in comparing the words of scripture with our own condition, that we use the proper means of rendering it of avail to ourselves. It is in the unison of the divine language with our own state of mind, that any positive effect is produced upon us. As a general rule, therefore, the proper method of studying the word of God implies a deep self-examination, at the same time: without which, whatever the Holy Spirit is able to effect, independent of direct means, we ought not to look for benefit to ourselves.

And, now, while I commend you to the good word of God, and to a prayerful examination of its suitableness to your own case, may it indeed dwell in you richly in all wisdom! May its hallowed truths be carried home with power to your heart, and bring to light within you the day spring from on high!

Yours very truly,

LETTER X.

On right desires.—The young man in the gospel.—A complaint of the inquirer.—One of the marks of right desires.—A misinterpretation of Romans ix. 3.—Right desires not a mere fear of hell.—The breathings of an awakened sinner.—Reformation of life connected with sincerity ;—and the spirit of forgiveness on our own part.—Right desires not capricious.—Trials from a disposition to dictate to God ;—and from wicked thoughts.—A recommendation.

MY DEAR SIR,

THERE is no inconsistency in saying that the sinner is directed to come to Christ without delay, and yet that, if his desires be of an unsuitable character, all application will be vain. The invitations of the gospel extend to all, whether they are accepted or not : and the command unto all men is, to repent and to close with the terms of salvation. Even he whose care and labour are expended in search of earthly happiness is not excluded from that general invitation. But then the tender of pardon and grace, as its language always clearly implies, requires the relinquishment of one pursuit, and the sincere engagement in another. It declares the inadequacy of worldly

pleasures to the demands of the soul ; and proposes a higher source of happiness. Now the only question is, whether the object held out by the gospel does indeed meet the consent and wish of the sinner. If it do so, no impediment, unless it be one of error in views, can remain in the way.

This is the sum of the whole matter before us. It is spiritual life and peace which are offered. If they be acceptable to the sinner, then all is well. But where the taste and affections cling to the world, or where an attempt is made to compromise between God and mammon, the object desired is not the peace of the Redeemer, or the enjoyment of spiritual life, but something of a carnal and selfish nature.

Such was the instance of the young man in the gospel. He had heard of the tender of salvation through Jesus Christ, and he came eagerly to inquire, " What shall I do ? " From childhood he had paid deference to the moral law ; and the command to an external obedience here seemed no way inconsistent with a spirit of worldliness. But when he ascertained that the means of indulging in such a spirit were to be relinquished on the very entrance into a heavenly life, he sorrowed at the sight of the unwelcome alternative, and went away more hopeless than he came. He certainly desired salvation ; but his heart

was set upon the world. Communion with God, or the spiritual pleasures of the Christian, were not "in all his thoughts." The sacrifice which he was required to make would have been of no moment to one whose soul panted for the enjoyment of a holy intercourse with God; for a common desire in behalf of the two things is contradictory in its nature. It is plain, then, that he understood nothing of the character of the object about which he was inquiring. Eternal life must begin with spiritual dispositions; and for these he had no wish.

Now let me apply this case. The man who seeks for salvation may have an eye only to the *future* blessedness of the Christian: if so, he does not distinctly see what it is he professes to be seeking; or else he would discover within himself a repugnance to the very boon he solicits. He may be willing, on deliberation, to sacrifice his property rather than lose his soul; and he would certainly be so to save his life. But the pleasures of divine grace are not attractive to his moral appetite. Nor has he any present sincere wish that they should be so.

There is not a more common complaint, on the part of a certain class of awakened sinners, than the following: "My failure, after all my efforts to obtain peace with Christ, leads me to fear that my desires are, in some respects, spurious; wrong

in their character ; and therefore inconsistent with the will of God." And in answer to this, I have more than once known a still greater confusion created by metaphysical distinctions relative to the operations of the will ; or by directions which occupy the attention with needless subtleties. Erroneous or unacceptable desires are only inclinations towards something else than the grace of God : and such is, more or less, the substance of all our mistakes on this subject.

A successful desire will be attended with a willingness to relinquish all things, in order to attain the great end in view. At the present day, we are not likely to be required to give up our whole property, or to forfeit our reputation, as a test of our sincerity. But we shall always be required to lend *the whole weight of the influence of both*, to the cause of the Redeemer. If it be not commanded that we abandon the ordinary comforts or enjoyments of life, it is enjoined that we enter into none of those which are inconsistent with a demeanour of piety, or which would cool our affections, or unfit us for devotional duties : or, in other words, that whatever will interfere with attainments in grace, or holiness, should be relinquished. In this requisition there is nothing but what is consistent with our own happiness, and with the very end we profess to have in view.

I am aware that far-stretched suppositions have

sometimes been formed on this subject, as tests of the disinterestedness and submission of the inquirer. Some have affirmed that, in order to obtain the divine favour we should so completely surrender our hearts and will to God, and so disinterestedly refer to his honour, as to be willing, if it would promote his glory, to endure the loss of the soul. This extravagant notion is not founded on mistaken ideas of love to God alone ; but has been supported by a misinterpretation of the passage you have quoted, in which the apostle is supposed to proffer the relinquishment of his own salvation for the greater glory to God in the salvation of many.* But I see nothing in this passage to countenance such an idea. The following paraphrase, by a judicious expounder of scripture, comes much nearer to the meaning of St. Paul: “ For methinks I could even wish that as Christ subjected himself to the curse, that he might deliver us from it, so I myself likewise were made anathema after the example of Christ; like him exposed to all the execrations of an enraged people, and even to the infamous and accursed death of crucifixion itself, for the sake of my brethren and kinsmen according to the flesh, that they might thereby be delivered from the guilt they have brought upon their own heads.”† The apostle could never have intended

* Rom. ix. 3.

† Doddridge, *in loc.*

to say that he was willing to lie under the eternal wrath of God for any consideration of possible good that might accrue from the doom. Such a supposition implies a palpable contradiction: it declares that so great was his love of God, that, if it would promote his honour, he was willing to be doomed *to hate him* for ever!

We have no right to indulge in such paradoxical fancies: and it is visionary to try our sincerity by questions which the scriptures have never presented to our notice. Moreover, to require evidence from ourselves of the strongest love to our Creator, as a prelude to giving ourselves up to him, is to require that we become sincere Christians, or that we be already what it is supposed we are seeking to be.

Besides, we may deceive ourselves by a very natural error here. God demands that we forego all that is earthly, or that we render all things subservient to our spiritual interest. In view of this requirement, and under an affecting sense of his danger, the awakened sinner may easily say, "I would give up all for Christ," while, at the same time, he may be insensible that he is making a self-righteous and self-dependent tender, a barter of one thing for another: and connected with this, he may feel as if he had a *right* of purchase to the gift which he asks. The effort which is visible in such an offer, renders it per-

fectly plain that pardon could avail him very little; for his heart is still set on the things he professes to relinquish. Now, although the invitations of the gospel are so universal, the promises of God are made only in behalf of a certain state of mind, to which their fitness is expressed by their own terms; the hungry, the thirsty, the poor in spirit, those who truly feel their guilt, inexcusableness, and just condemnation. In order to ascertain our sincerity, it is hence that our questions should arise, respecting the nature of our desires.

A mere wish to escape the sufferings of hell makes but a small part of the desires of the *true* penitent: and, though there are very different degrees of such feeling in different cases, I have sometimes known those to whom it hardly occurred as a perceptible part of their solicitude. The scriptural descriptions of hell are well suited to produce alarm. They do so by an appeal to our natural desire of self-preservation. But then the directions, to flee from the wrath to come, are only one of the uses of the law to lead us to Christ. While they fix our attention on the penalty of neglect, they should induce us to study earnestly the way of salvation; a serious comparison of which with our true condition, cannot but impress us with a deeper sense of our wants. "The devils believe and tremble." They

believe in that eternal justice of which they are righteously victims. The impenitent sinner, too, when he feels himself a dying man, would willingly flee from the wrath to come. But neither of these has any sincere inclination to holiness.

It is thus with the spurious desires of many, who have no wish for present purity of heart, or none for its own sake ; but who, on the contrary, admit the necessity of a change to spirituality of mind, with a very deep-seated reluctance, and only as the less of two evils.

Further : sincere desires may be connected with somewhat obscure views of the loveliness of heavenly grace. The Inquirer may utter the breathings of his heart in such language as the following ; “ I see not only the danger, but the emptiness of a worldly portion. I have not tasted of the excellency of a divine life ; but I can form some vague idea of its value, and its suitableness to a state of glory. I can discover nothing in myself that encourages hope, but every thing that nourishes despair. I can exclaim, with Peter, ‘ To whom shall I go, THOU hast the words of eternal life.’ Yet I am sensible that I do not love God. O that I did ! How contemptible is every thing compared with the love which is due to him !”

And can you say this ? Do you earnestly wish

to know the whole truth as it is? In all this have you said, "I desire to desire aright; I believe, help my unbelief?"

Sincerity, as was before intimated, is inseparable from an effort, on our own part, to reform our disposition and life. Every temper that is opposed to a holy life; every unhallowed practice, great or little, will be freely relinquished. The right eye is to be plucked out, or the right hand is to be cut off; and the executioners of the sentence are to be ourselves. We are not to wait in the hope that another and more gentle hand will relieve us, without an exertion on our own part.

There is one thing here which is too frequently overlooked. The feelings of prejudice or dislike, which we may have entertained against any one, even with a belief in their justice, or a retaliatory disposition under a sense of wrong received, must be extinguished. All possible pains must be taken to destroy whatever is inconsistent with Christ-like and self-denying benevolence. Before we bring our gift to the altar, we are not only to repair wrongs committed by ourselves, but we are to fix and cherish a conciliatory temper with regard to others. This is a point of far more extensive application than may be generally imagined. I have seen those whose sense of injury received, or whose personal wound of pride, kept open as it was by embittered recollections, de-

tained *them*, (while, under the power of a criminal self-ignorance, they knew it not,) from the great object of their pursuit. They have expressed a willingness to *forgive*, but not to forget; and they did not reflect that the temper which lies at the bottom of this disposition is that of a haughty bearing, utterly unsuited to the state of a suppliant for mercy. “Forgive, as *I forgive*,” is the tenor of acceptable prayer. But this petition utters not only a desire that our sins may not be set to our account, but that, according to the divine blessing, they may be “covered over,” remembered no more. How suitable to the state of some inquirers is the consideration of this part of the Lord’s prayer! How fitting to a mind that would be prepared to love Him, whose pardon is sought, by a meekness and gentleness of disposition! And how well is it adapted to develop the symptoms of a perverse temper, where they have taken their secret, and perhaps unsuspected seat!

Acceptable desires will possess permanency. It is permanency that most distinguishes *principle*. Fitful wishes can produce no real good, and they designate an important defect somewhere. I do not mean that the strength or intensity of desire can continue exactly the same at all times. This is incompatible with our mutable and depraved nature, even in the highest state of restoring

grace that is compatible with our earthly pilgrimage. But the prevalent leaning of the mind will be to the grand concern before the Inquirer. His thoughts may be diverted from it by transient occurrences; but they will still sustain an unfixed character, like the shaken magnetic needle, until they are suffered to return to the direction in which alone they can rest. It is this permanency which gives the inquirer an opportunity of turning every thing to account, in the ordinary occurrences of life. His bias of thought enables him to derive some incentive to perseverance from every thing with which he is concerned; while it assists him to gather from the same, a deeper insight into his own natural character.

I have tried to impress upon your mind, on a former occasion, that the whole difficulty on the part of the sinner may be resolved into his unwillingness to take God upon his own terms. And it is not difficult to prove, that all the interval, between first impressions and the peace which flows from reconciliation by Christ, is occupied in a manner that clearly testifies to the truth of this position. Is it not a melancholy fact, that all this time is occupied in controversy with God? “Whosoever *will*, let him come,” is the language of holy writ. The reason why the word of God does not take up the particular trials of the sinner, and present to our notice the minute

experience of distinct cases, which you seem to think so necessary, is, that, as all obstructions are referrible to some fault in the sinner himself, they are sufficiently shewn in the broad statement of his own reluctance to be saved *from sin*, or in that of the deceitfulness and treachery of the human heart. Of the danger accruing from these, the word of truth warns us as distinctly as possible. It would hardly be important, then, to extend those details. Whenever the experience of a change in the heart of the sinner is marked and distinct, he is usually able to date it from the time in which he felt able to relinquish all hold on himself or the world. Then he can most clearly discover, that all his previous detention from hope was caused by a defect here.

I must again entreat you to think no more of the trials and disappointments which seem to accompany your exertions. You ought to ascertain their true meaning, and to see in them an additional reason for an immediate and unqualified surrender to Jesus Christ. In that blessed event, you will find that they have been overruled, as instruments of conferring on you a greater knowledge of yourself and of God.

The idea that so many evil thoughts come into your mind is indeed very painful. But these do not necessarily prove your desires to be false and unacceptable. The best of Christians mourn

over this humiliating fact. But you are to discriminate between tempting thoughts to which your inclination assents, and those which arise in opposition to your will, and which, with earnest prayer, you endeavour to repress. Should you ever have reason to indulge the hope of the Christian, you will not cease to lament the feelings of your depravity. And now, while the great issue is pending, you are not to expect that Satan will relinquish his hold without a vigorous effort to retain you. The rejoicing of heaven over a renewed soul is answered by the malignant groans of hell at the loss of a victim. Reply to every discouraging suggestion of the adversary, by the word of God. So did the Redeemer himself. Whenever those discouragements are suggested by the scriptures, recollect that it is by detached and mutilated sentences. It was so, too, in the temptation of Christ.* Abide by his example in every such trial.

I conclude this letter by remarking that a serious inquirer, who was much tried by evil

* In this instance, the quotation of Satan, "He shall give his angels charge concerning thee," is imperfect. It wants the adjunct, "in all thy ways:" that is, in the ways of one "dwelling in the secret place of the Most High." He shall indeed be kept "in all his ways," for these imply a cordial obedience to the will of Jehovah: departing from which, with any hope of safety, would be tempting God.

thoughts, once told me that he never failed in his efforts to discard them, when he carefully pondered over the fifty-first Psalm. There is, indeed, much in it to occupy your reflections, in the most beneficial manner, and to adopt as the most appropriate materials for prayer before Him who pities and will heal the broken heart.

Farewell,

Yours, as ever, &c.

LETTER XI.

Difficulties in prayer.—Causes.— Mistake respecting the nature of prayer.—Confusion in the mind of the Inquirer.— False anticipations in prayer.—Perplexity from our ignorance of the Person addressed.—Directions in prayer.—The duty of describing personal trials.—Habit of attention.—Remedy for wandering thoughts.— Application of special promises.—Scriptural examples.—Seasons for prayer.— Ejaculatory desires.—Forms of prayer.— Does God ever withhold his grace, for a season, to try the sinner?—This query examined.

MY DEAR SIR,

YOU are right when you say, that “no class of difficulties seems more serious to the Inquirer than those relating to the duty of prayer.” Easy as it may have appeared to him, formerly, to offer a petition to the throne of grace, his disappointment now is frequently equal to that which he experiences in reading the scriptures. The discovery which he may make, in his first attempt to pray, is mortifying and distressing: and it ought also to be humbling. He sees that the utterance of a form of words, and the posture of

supplication, on which before he would have depended, are a very different thing from the awakened exercise of heart before the mercy-seat. He looks back with astonishment to those unmeaning acts of outward devotion, with which he had once satisfied his conscience, and for which he expected, in return, the favour of God. He sees, that there was something wanting of which he had not thought ; and which he now labours to obtain. Perhaps there is no discovery more striking, to the mind of the awakened sinner, than this : and certainly none is more alarming to his fears. All the general directions which he receives, on this subject, appear either inapplicable to his case, or wholly impracticable. In a strait of this kind, advice is often thrown away, although given by the lips of prudence and piety. All representations of divine mercy are ineffectual. To others, he conceives, they may be suitable ; but not to himself. He apprehends himself utterly incompetent to express any thing but empty sounds, which reach no further than the atmosphere above him. Let us endeavour to account for this.

One of the first causes is *a mistake respecting the nature of prayer*. So confident was he in the mercy of God, that he believed any application for it would be infallibly successful. To the bare expressions of prayer he had attributed a

sovereign influence ; without any reference to the state of the petitioner's heart, or to a sense of his personal wants. He makes the experiment in the first hour of his alarm : and he ends it, as might have been expected, with a sense of disappointment. Now, the whole reason of this failure may be summed up in a single word, *ignorance* : ignorance of what he was doing, of the character of his God, or of the nature of the object desired. Had this man duly reflected on these things, the tenor of his prayer would have been very different from what it was. Instead of asking for an undefined something, instead of looking for what he did not understand, he would have seen the necessity of praying, " Enlighten thou mine eyes !" He would have seen the importance of giving himself up, at once, to the holy and sovereign God, as awfully ignorant as well as helpless. He would have seen, too, the duty of approaching the great Arbiter of his fate, with a very different idea of his attributes and government.

Never let us, my dear sir, venture on the solemn act of addressing Deity, without pausing to inquire of ourselves, what we are about to do. Reflection and self-examination should always precede the exercise of prayer : not on our own account alone, but likewise on that of Him who demands the homage of both the understanding and the heart.

Another cause of failure consists in the confusion of thought, which usually accompanies the anxiety of the awakened sinner. This painful agitation and conflict of the passions often indisposes the mind to any direct exertion. This is a natural effect of powerful or unexpected grief, in even temporal circumstances; and I have adverted to it in a former letter. The feelings may so completely overcome the judgment, as to prevent any proper application of the faculty of thought. In this state of distress we hear the distressed soul exclaim, "*O, I cannot pray!*" He makes the effort again and again; but only to relinquish it as hopeless, after each instance of trial.

This is sometimes an awful condition of mind. The moral darkness within, which the sufferer vainly attempts to dissipate, is as it were in contrast with the light of the natural world around him; and it seems to tell fearfully to his soul. The tumult in his bosom, that breaks out into the loud sigh, or the heaving and reluctant groan, that interrupts the stillness of his place of retirement; and the silence which succeeds it, and seems to pervade the universe of his being, as if to intimate a negative to any hopes of relief; all are portentous to an alarmed imagination. An undefined but horrible sensation of vacancy attends the exclamation, "*I am lost!*" Attempts to force the way

through this darkness and despair, half frantic and impulsive as they are, serve only to render the sense of wretchedness more complete, and the conviction of hopelessness more decided. This case is not quite an extreme one, and different degrees of approach to it you have often noticed in biographical sketches. The great perplexity here consists in the inability to give vent to the pent-up feeling——

“ If I could only pray—If I could give utterance to thought—or if I could be sensible that my broken cry is heard—either of these would relieve me of at least part of the weight which I am doomed to sustain !” Here the spirit is wounded by an unseen hand, and yet knows not where nor how. The exclamation, “ Help, Lord, or I perish !” is made with entire distrust. Consideration or reflection are afar off; or they have no certain object.

Yet, even in this case, we should direct the Inquirer to prayer. But it would be with the same advice given in the last instance: let him think what he is to pray for. Let him remember that the mere burst of passion is, not infrequently, the indulgence of a selfish feeling, encouraged in order to excite compassion or sympathy; and exceedingly apt to produce that sensation of self-complacency, which is not easily accounted for, but which hides or palliates the deformity of

guilt: and this may be, while the sinner is insensible of the effect on himself.

God, my dear sir, is not the author of confusion. We are not to attribute such effects as these to him, and then ask his relief without knowing what we require. But we are graciously encouraged to take our very cares on this subject to the mercy seat: and say in the language of one of old, "I am full of confusion; therefore see thou mine affliction!"

It is not necessary, however, to suppose so great a chaos of mind as this confusion implies, in order to insure the same failure. There may be conviction of sin, and sense of want; some vague notion of a distant Saviour; and yet the sensation, if I may so express myself, of a void space, wherever the thoughts roam in search of a resting-place. This may be, sometimes, the experience of the Christian himself; when some secret sin, or some lurking habit of evil, has corroded his peace, and created a solitude of feeling, and a dejection of spirit; when, until the latent cause is brought to view, he roams abroad, like the dove of Noah, seeking in vain for a congenial element, or for a place of known and safe repose. What energy of meaning, what full utterance of feeling, is conveyed in the words of the patriarch, "O, that I knew where I might find him; that I might come even to his

seat! I would order my cause before him, and fill my mouth with arguments. I would know the words which he would answer me, and understand what he would say unto me!"*

Another cause of failure consists in a *false anticipation of the kind of answer to be given by the hearer of prayer*. The transport of joy, the delightful feeling of a holy confidence, the assurance of pardon, the plain proof of heavenly communion, or the sudden removal of anxiety; these, or some of them, are generally the objects of sanguine expectation in the ardent mind. Even he who is near to the kingdom of heaven, may detain himself from all that he is seeking, while he perversely insists on certain results in certain prescribed forms. The answer to prayer may be of a very different character from these presumings. An exact compliance with our own wishes, might be inconsistent with our real good. Paul's thrice uttered petition obtained an answer extremely different from his expectations: but then that answer subserved a purpose equally good with the one which he had sought, or indeed far better: and thus it will often be. Instead of conscious peace and the enjoyment of pardon, a deeper sense of sin may ensue in the bosom of the penitent. Instead of participation in the plea-

* Job xxiii. 3—5.

tures of communion with God, the only evidence of acceptance may be latent in those fervent aspirations of soul, which perhaps indicate a change unknown to himself.

I admit, with you, that one who has never hitherto exercised any earnestness in the act of prayer, and who for the first time attempts that duty with seriousness, may feel at a loss respecting the personal object of his address. Accustomed to things of sense as he has been, he may find a difficulty in addressing a Being spiritual and invisible; of whom he attempts in vain to form some idea, while yet he conceives that a just conception of that Being, as a person, is indispensable to a right direction of the mind. Hence it is not uncommon to call in the aid of imagination, in order to figure a material appearance for Him to whom the prayer is to be preferred. The flitting and varying representation, which this faculty presents, increases the disorder which already reigns within the soul. Nor would it be extraordinary, in such a dilemma, if we were to find ourselves engaged in the double exertion, of sustaining the imagination in its unhallowed work, and at the same time exploring our wants and desires. I have sometimes heard the inquirer, asking in unaffected distress, "In what form he is to conceive of God, and how he is to bring within the range of his mental vision, the Being

whom he wishes to address." This complaint is not, however, one which, for the most part, is openly made. It more usually belongs to the hidden perplexities of the Inquirer.

But all the difficulty arises from the state of the petitioner's mind. If the sense of his wants were less vague, and if the specific design of his prayer were rendered distinct by a particular knowledge of those wants, he would see no reason for this complaint. It is not any sensible appearance of his Maker, that he should call to his aid (nor are we at liberty to indulge such fantasies); but it is a consciousness of the unhallowed condition of our hearts, and our extreme necessities, which he ought to cherish. Only this can form a prayer of faith and feeling.

That sense of distance, too, between himself and his Creator, of which the Inquirer so often speaks, is to be removed by a better knowledge of his own heart. It is this alone, bitter and painful as it may be, which will produce the opposite sensation of the unspeakably awful, yet soul-sustaining *nearness* of the Deity to us. You observe an illustration of this remark in any instance of strong remorse. In that, the sufferer makes a very different complaint. He is conscious that the all-seeing eye of his Maker is upon him, and feels as if the space were infinitely narrow between him and his Judge.

No difficulty ought to arise in our minds from our notions of the Trinity. The scriptures have very distinctly made it our duty, in our private devotions, to address ourselves to Jesus Christ; and this, as I have before said, was a direction of his own. We approach to him, as our Mediator and Advocate. Thus there is no higher act of faith to which a believer can be called, than that of committing his departing soul to the care of his God. The dying language of the first Christian martyr was, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!”*

Let me subjoin a few reflections respecting the exercise of prayer, which may possibly be of some assistance in that important duty.

Endeavour to describe your personal trials and perplexities when you come to a throne of grace. This practice, with that of confessing our sins, at the same time, recommended as it is by the examples of the saints, and enjoined by the word of God, has many advantages which may not, at first, occur to the mind of the Inquirer. It is true, indeed, that our Creator knows the extent and aggravations of our guilt, and the nature of our wants; but he requires *us* to know them likewise. He is not ignorant of our necessities; but he would see us sensible of them ourselves. Now,

* Some judicious remarks on this subject may be found in “Owen’s Cases of Conscience.” Discourse V. vol. xvi. of his Works. Mr. Russell’s edition.

the detail of these presupposes us to have examined our hearts, and to have formed at least some acquaintance with them: and this very act of narrating is well adapted to produce that humility of mind and sense of dependence, without which we shall certainly plead in vain. The very recounting of our personal trials and difficulties brings us almost certainly nearer to Him to whom they are thus told; and it is eminently suited to promote our faith and confidence in him. You have sometimes observed how clearly this is illustrated in some cases of temporal suffering. The man who sits down to write an account of his distresses to one from whom relief is possible, is not only led to a more penetrating discovery of his situation, and becomes more affected by it, but his expectation of sympathy and hope of success are greatly strengthened. The directions of scripture are, therefore, founded in wisdom, and admirably fitted to our nature, when they bid us present all our cares, and spread all our wants, before a compassionate Saviour.

Endeavour to keep your attention as fixed as possible, while engaged in this exercise. There is no fault into which we more easily fall than a wandering of thought. Apart from the sinfulness of this (for, indulged, it is a fearful sign of hypocrisy), it is likely to be followed by the most dangerous consequences to ourselves. Wander-

ing thought in devotion, of all other sins, most easily becomes a habit, by a partial indulgence ; and it most unconsciously steals upon us. A single instance of this extends itself to our next effort : and the petitioner may find the unhappy propensity almost beyond the reach of his arrest. The best remedy, perhaps, for so insidious an evil, is that of uttering our thoughts aloud. The small degree of exertion which this requires, is well suited to the exigency of the case. It enforces attention ; and prevents that distraction which external objects so readily produce in the mind. It does more. It makes an impression which may be long durable. A judicious friend who complained much of this temptation, in seasons set apart for meditation, has since observed that he never failed to find “ thinking aloud ” an effectual means of preventing his being drawn aside from the subject of his reflections.

Apply special promises to special cases in prayer. I have already hinted the importance of turning the precepts of God into prayer ; and the duty of applying to ourselves whatever scriptural passages meet our condition. We should do the same with the *promises* of the divine word. There is something exceedingly encouraging in presenting the very words of Him who can aid us, at the throne of grace ; and so far as they suit our condition, we are warranted in doing so.

There seems a special hope of a blessing in the very reflection, that the same Spirit which indited the language of holy writ, is said to assist the earnest and sincere petitioner.* You will no doubt recollect how common was the practice which I am commending among “good men of old.” Jacob urged, for an important purpose, that Jehovah had bidden him leave his country, and kindred, and had given him assurance of security.† Solomon presented the promise which had been made to his father David.‡ Jehoshaphat named that which had been given to Solomon.|| Daniel reads the pledge to Jeremiah, and then applies it in his prayer.§ The apostle Paul embraces the promise which had been given to Joshua so long before, and makes it the ground of an unshaken confidence in his own day.¶ And Simeon expired in the very arms of a gracious promise, with the breathings of prayer.** What encouragement have we, then, in the reflection, that the special ground of an answer to prayer lies in the performance of promises. The faithfulness of God is our surety.

Regard proper seasons of prayer. I do not mean, simply, that stated periods should be set apart for this purpose. It would always be well

* Rom. viii. 26.

† Gen. xxxii. 9.

‡ 1 Kings viii. 24.

|| 2 Chron. xx. 8.

§ Dan. ix. 2, 3.

¶ Heb. xiii. 5, 6.

** Luke ii. 29.

to form and sustain a habit of this kind; the violation of which, especially where it is not necessary, has certainly an unhappy effect on our subsequent devotions. But there are seasons when the heart of the Inquirer, to use a strong figure, is *full*; when his feelings are more tender, his desires more strong; and his sense both of his wants, and the nearness of his God, is more distinct. These golden hours should never be suffered to pass unimproved. They are signals for prayer: and its utterance would usually be more free, and its pleas more urgent, than at our ordinary and fixed periods. I doubt whether there ever was a sincere Inquirer, who was not sensible of this difference in the state of his feelings. The same susceptibility, which exposes him to changes, from trifles inimical to serious thought, prepares him for impressions of a different nature from more favourable incidents. A passing word, or a petty circumstance which had no direct reference to his state of mind, may sometimes produce a more powerful effect, in softening and subduing the heart, than hours of sober reflection.

I am aware, that it may not always be convenient to retire, for the immediate improvement of such effects. But we ought to sacrifice a less advantage for a greater; and endeavour to improve, as fully as possible, what may really be

the operation of the Holy Ghost upon the mind. Yet, if this should be impracticable, let ejaculatory prayer supply the place of more regular devotions. It is a delightful reflection that God is with us every where; and is every where ready to listen to the cry of the sincere penitent. Some of the most effectual prayers recorded in the bible, are of the ejaculatory character. The Saviour himself, to whom we offer our desires, has set us an eminent example. Nor indeed do I believe, if it were right to institute the comparison, that the observance of set seasons for devotion so completely evinces a proper frame of mind, all important as it is, as an habitual readiness and disposition to earnest ejaculatory prayer. Here, too, the secular avocations of life can create no serious interruption. The heart may hold sweet and solemn converse with God, in the midst of the bustle and distractions of the world.

With respect to forms of prayer, they may sometimes be necessary; but I fear it is the plea of indolence, or ignorance, or diffidence, that is frequently preferred in their behalf. I have always thought them unfavourable to the great interest of the inquirer. It would hardly be practicable for any man to form a prayer precisely suited to the state and exigencies of another. Any such attempt would be defective in those particulars which most nearly concern our

private experience, and the description of which would require an intimate knowledge of our own case. The expressions, confessions, and terms of prayers composed by other persons, are of necessity general; and they seldom reach far into the heart. Independently of this, they too often create a wrong leaning of the mind; while they form a marked contrast to that freshness of desire which springs warm from the bosom. I have said “a wrong leaning;” for all subjects of prayer do not closely fit the case of the inquirer; and where they do not, they tend to increase his confusion and perplexity, however well indited they may be. This indeed is an effect which he very frequently discovers in the devotions of the sanctuary. The utter impossibility of suiting any public leading in prayer to the wants of all, and the duty of each presenting his own case, seems to have been referred to by Solomon at the dedication of the temple: “What prayer and supplication soever be made by any man, or by all thy people Israel, *which shall know every man the plague of his own heart*, and spread forth his hands towards this house; then hear thou in heaven thy dwelling place, and forgive and do, and give to every man according to his ways, whose heart thou knowest; *for thou, even thou only, knowest the hearts of all the children of men.*”*

* 1 Kings viii. 38, 39.

Advantageous as these set compositions may be in certain instances, for public worship (and even then they require frequent alterations to suit them to the circumstances of the time and the age), they are not adapted to the private use of the awakened sinner. Besides, the very attempt to express our own personal wants, not only assists a clear insight into ourselves, and thus constitutes one of the means of promoting the great end in view; but it adds intensity to the sense of want and the feelings of desire, and leaves an impression likely to be abiding and salutary.

It does more: if the directions which I have already given be followed, the practice of extemporaneous prayer will lead us to cultivate a familiar acquaintance with the word of God. Habituate yourself, then, to the use of your own language. However feeble and incoherent you may deem it, the Great Hearer of prayer will never reject it on account of its verbal imperfections.

You ask, *whether God ever withholds his grace from the Inquirer in order to try him further, after he is already endued with a penitent and humble frame of feeling?* The whole tenor of my letters is against the affirmative of this question. But it deserves more explicit notice.

I have more than once known persons in deep distress, advised to persevere under the idea that the Dispenser of pardon may be putting their

patience to a test; or, in other words, waiting until they acquire this virtue, as a preliminary to the reward of acceptance. This is very injudicious and unscriptural. Instead of proving an incentive to perseverance, as it is intended to be, it is discouraging in the extreme. The unregenerate sinner can achieve nothing to *entitle* him to favour: and there is no intermediate state, in which he can ever be supposed, between ruin and grace. Nor can any withholding, on the part of God, when the sinner approaches aright, detain him in the former of these conditions. If it were otherwise, and we were allowed a supposition on this subject, then the death of the sinner, in that intermediate state, would leave the fault of his final rejection from heaven at the door of the Author of his being.

The examples which you have quoted, in the Syrophenician woman, the importunate widow, and the neighbour soliciting bread, were never designed to encourage such a conclusion; nor have they any reference whatever to the case. The trials which God may suffer his people to undergo, while he supports them at the same time, and improves some grace within them to their ultimate good, is no indication that he ever would stand back, a single moment, from the penitent sinner. To require immediate and unconditional submission on our own part; and to

tender the promises in return, and then delay their fulfilment; has never been the manner of the Divine dealing. The prayer of the true penitent is answered at once, although it may not be in a way perceptible to himself, nor with the immediate consequences to his own mind, which he had fondly anticipated. We must learn to distinguish between the *manner* and the *thing*; between an utter refusal and the mode of conferring the boon. I should not hesitate to say to any complainer on this subject, that either his prayer was already answered, or the fault was entirely his own. We cannot escape this inference, if we consider the Creator as consistent with himself. I cannot, therefore, restrain an expression of regret when I read a contrary sentiment, in works expressly designed to relieve or assist the Inquirer. The question seems to be so clearly and unequivocally settled in the word of God, that it is a matter of surprise how it should involve a doubt in any other mind, than one harassed by its fears, and confused by its perplexities.

Adieu, dear sir. May the spirit of prayer richly abound in you; and in its exercise may you realize the full assurance of grace, mercy, and peace!

Truly yours, &c.

LETTER XII.

A common error adverted to again.—An evil from theological distinctions.—Different kinds of repentance.—The scriptural distinction.—Sorrow does not constitute repentance.—The perversion of selfish sorrow to a false hope—Examples.—The error reproved in scripture.—Its cause.—Causes leading to genuine repentance.—Conviction of sin.—Why not to be effected without divine power.—Looking to Christ a means of repentance.—Evangelical sorrow follows.—Difference between counterfeit and true repentance.—The practical effects of real repentance.

MY DEAR SIR,

THERE is one error which I have had reason several times to mention, as possessing a more pervading influence over the mind of the Inquirer than any other. This is the idea, that there is a certain something to be obtained by himself, before he may venture to approach the Redeemer with the hope of mercy, or even the expectation of an audience: and this error creeps into his very notion of the Christian graces. It puts a construction on the divine language foreign from its true import, and renders reflection upon it the means of increased confusion. You have known the application of this remark to the duty and

doctrine of *repentance*. I have frequently seen the convinced sinner keeping aloof, and at least half satisfied with himself in doing so, until he may be able to ascertain whether he has evidence of true repentance ; without which he would conceive all application nugatory, and accompanied with which he would be assured of a favourable answer. The amount of all this is, that he desires to be a Christian before he asks the divine influence, which is to render him such ; that he would have evidence of being saved, before he solicits salvation. This practical contradiction is too flagrant to need a comment.

Another evil on this subject arises from those theological distinctions respecting the nature of this grace, with which the Inquirer may often be more entertained than edified. A clear view of repentance, and of its place in the covenant of God, is certainly important. But the adoption of metaphysical distinctions, and a nice and accurate discrimination of the consecutive order of certain causes and effects, is rather an accomplishment in the theologian, than an advantage to the Inquirer. Instead of reviewing the past to discover the evidence of direct approach to repentance, or to institute a comparison of such workings with other things, the only duty before you is to learn whether you have indeed repented. To assist you in this, I will reduce within the

limits of a single letter, all that appears to me essential on the subject.

Practical divines have divided repentance into three kinds: the first is called *natural*, and it is supposed to have no reference to rewards or punishments; as when a man of integrity and honour regrets the commission of an act which violates the rules he had adopted for his own guidance, but without fearing, or thinking of, any consequences arising from the law of God. I will not stay to discuss the justness of this notion. The second distinction is that of *legal repentance*, which is simply a regret of the commission of sin on account of its personal consequences in the penalty of a violated law. Different from this, *evangelical repentance* is both a principle and a habit; it belongs to the Christian alone, and it is accompanied with a class of feelings peculiar to itself. These I shall afterwards describe.

There are two words in the scriptures, which our translators have rendered by the term repentance.* The first of these signifies *after-reflection*, or *after-care*, and *anxiety*. It indicates a simple alteration of feeling, sorrow on account of something that has taken place on our own part, without any reference to the nature of that sorrow, or its durability; and without any connection

* Μεταμέλεια and Μετάνοια.

with the moral character of the act, or its eternal consequences. You have an example of this in the man who has expended time or money upon a deed of benevolence, and then regrets having done so.

The second word, which is literally translated *a change of mind*, is intended to designate an alteration for the better, and refers to the purposes and dispositions of the heart. It indicates not only sorrow for the past, but such a radical change in the affections as will create a permanent abhorrence of the evil. In 2 Corinthians vii. 10. you will find both these words in the original Greek, with the constructions now assigned them.

If I were to select the mistake most common to Inquirers on this subject, I should certainly point to the impression, that *sorrow constitutes repentance*, and that its intensity is the test of sincerity. It is this idea which frequently leads the Inquirer to peculiar endeavours in order to deepen his grief, without examining its character or its cause. Mere sorrow, independently of reference to these, may be very distinct from real repentance. Judas exhibited this sorrow of mere remorse; and, according to the first sense of the word, he repented of his sin; but the feeling terminated in suicide. The Jews, on the day of Pentecost, were in deep sorrow when they cried out, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" The answer of

Peter directed them to repentance. But the distinction is not less marked in the words of another apostle ; “ Godly sorrow worketh repentance :” and, therefore, however conducive to that end, it is not the end itself. Yet the distress of thousands, under serious impressions, is very far from reaching to “ godly sorrow.”

I have seen an unprofitable grief in more than one practical form, for the natural temper and disposition will always vary the form ; and not rarely has it led to the ruin of the soul.

A friend of mine, whose conscience the word of God had reached, in its ordinary ministration, was seized, from the first moment, with a horror of apprehension which no argument could allay. Every countenance which he saw recalled some bitter recollections ; every topic of conversation, or subject of thought presented new reasons for self-reproach. His feelings were wrought up to an agony which threatened his intellects ; and he presented a living spectacle of the picture painted by a poet’s fancy :

“ So writhes the mind remorse hath riven ;
Unfit for earth, undoomed for heaven :
Darkness above, despair beneath,
Around it flame, within it death.”

But what was the consequence of all this ? The pity and sympathy which such a distressing case produced in the hearts of others, and which

were often most injudiciously expressed, paradoxical as it may seem, led to similar sensations in his own bosom, and in behalf of his own condition. He appeared to have separated his sad state of mind from himself; and, after then viewing it as a proper object of compassion, he very naturally concluded that God did the same: and gradually assumed the hope of mercy, without (we have reason to fear) a single just ground, or any evidence of a truly penitent disposition.

To one who has not examined the workings of the heart, it may appear surprising, that a sufferer can so abstractedly view his sorrow as apart from himself, and literally feel a sympathy for it as if it were the lot of another. But no one who has endured the pungency of grief for a length of time, and has taken the pains to analyse his feelings, will fail to discover this reaction. The tenderness and softness of the feeling which then ensues, may easily be mistaken for a change in the bent and disposition of the mind. The Inquirer, if we might still call him so, is contented with this effect. He looks away from those tests, which, on even a slight survey, would have proved him wanting in spiritual taste and desires.

There is another appearance of this sorrow, which is still more imposing, and which is very naturally produced in certain physical constitutions, which bend like the willow to the earth,

whenever the storm of affliction is severe. P——r was one of this description. The very first sense of his sinfulness appeared to impart a meekness and gentleness to his spirit; very far from that boisterous effusion of grief, which soon expends itself by its violence, and leaves a suspicious calm after its departure; or else gives place to an equally fatal reaction. The spirit of P——r acquired an apparent placidness; while it drooped under reflections which mortified his pride, and produced a conscious hopelessness within him. It bowed to the stroke of sorrow, as if it courted the blow, and as if a given number of the strokes were to complete the measure of his suffering. It was a fancied martyrdom, in which he anticipated the sacrifice of his passions; or a fiery ordeal, in which his evil propensities were to be consumed, and the proof of his success to be in the patience and submission of his temper. Neither cause nor effect, in all this, was understood. He looked for that result, which is to be produced by the gracious power of the Holy Spirit, as an issue that was to be completed by the process of depressing sorrow. As might be expected in such a case, his only complaint was that his grief was not sufficiently pungent: while, from every source whence it was possible to derive a bitter recollection, he was endeavouring to collect new habiliments of mourning, and new means of mental

depression. As might have been expected, his labour was not in vain. He succeeded in forming an habitual despondency, accompanied with all that suavity which renders it attractive, and that self-persuasion of humility which so readily follows it; without a single idea of the loathsomeness of sin, or of the nature of evangelical repentance.

But whatever be the form of this fictitious grief, it is severely reproved by the word of God. He asks, of some, who had fallen into this self-righteous delusion, “Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? Is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the Lord? Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness?”* And a verse which follows, beautifully describes the effect of the divine blessing on the mind of the sincere penitent, who to a conviction of sin adds a discharge of duty, and a faithful obedience to the will of God; though a sense of darkness still humbles and dejects his soul: “Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee, and the glory of the Lord shall be thy rereward.”

* Is. lviii. 5—7.

The error in both the preceding cases, as well as in many others, consists in attributing to nature what is the work of the Spirit alone. It was the promise of God, that his Son should be “exalted to be a Prince and a Saviour, to give repentance to Israel.” The gift is from on high; while the means which are used to bring it into exercise are invariably the same. Let us examine them.

The first is, *a true conviction, or sense of guilt.* There is something in our natural constitution which renders supernatural aid indispensable, to produce this effect. That inherent selfishness, which blinds us to the truth and leads us to hope for the best, while it palliates and excuses manifest evil, can be restrained by none but a divine power. You have seen its effects, in another shape, in cases of daily occurrence. The culprit in a civil court, whom an enlightened jury have condemned, and whom every auditor at the trial concurs in pronouncing guilty, sees a variety of causes, in the manner and circumstances of the offence, in the temptation which led to it, and in his own passions, to mitigate the crime, for which he is to pay the penalty of a violated law. His guilt indeed is proved, and he may not be disposed to deny it. Still you cannot convince him, that there are not circumstances which entitle him to the consideration of mercy. Under these

impressions, it is certain that he does not take a fair view of his own case.

Of a similar nature are the convictions of an unrenewed sinner. He may be assured of his doom ; he may agonize under a consciousness of approaching wrath ; and he may believe that the future woe is the consequence of his guilt. But, still, he secretly believes that there is no proportion between the evil and its punishment. He is not persuaded that, in his own instance, “ the Judge of all the earth will do RIGHT ” in his condemnation. Or, if he profess to admit the equity of his God, he fosters a latent hope, from the imagined disparity of his guilt, with all its supposed palliations, and the penalty of the broken law.

Independently of this, there is very often a false view of the state of things between him and God. He sees his Creator in the light, not of one pure and holy and hating iniquity, and desiring that his creature should turn and live ; but, as an inexorable judge, a severe and inflexible arbiter. All this, accompanied as it may be with dreadful apprehensions, is a most imperfect view of the state of his soul's affairs. He forgets, that the separation between the soul and God, with all that makes up the misery of the world of woe, is not simply the result of crimes that are past.

It is a necessary attendant on the existing state of the sinner. It is not merely that God hates him, as a transgressor; but he hates his God. There is an active hostility against his Maker, which is not always brought into visible play, and which he attempts to conceal from his own sight. It is the cherished ignorance or forgetfulness of this, which constitutes his first serious difficulty: and it is the full discovery of this, which forms the climax of a state of horror, to which the mind is sometimes brought, presenting a faint, yet awful exhibition of the condition of lost spirits.

An example of all this fearfulness I well remember.

A——— received no very deep wound in his first discovery of danger. There was even a kind of pleasure attending that discovery, arising from a sanguine expectation, that pardon and mercy were at no great interval of space from his present condition. Baffled hopes led to more serious efforts to learn more of himself. A further development of his guilt daily increased his consciousness of a doom terribly drawing nearer and nearer. In this his thoughts became absorbed. A continued failure augmented his distress, while it brought into action a bitterness of feeling wholly in contrast with what had seemed to be his natural character. From secret accusations, he proceeded to more explicit reflections, against the

Divine Being. Malignity was embodied in language, which would shock the ears of any who respected religion. Pride, disappointed hope, and a galling sense of utter inability to help himself, were visible together, in the expressions which fell from his lips. "I see my wretchedness," said he, on one occasion, when both manner and tone indicated the strong conflict of passions within, "and God sees it too. He who alone could help me is arrayed against me. There is no escape. No power can withstand him. Hell is before me. Would that no God existed, or that he were other than he is!"—There was something so blasphemous in all this, that one would be disposed to question the sanity of the utterer. But there was no reason for such a doubt. The example may not be common; but no example of the complete and open acting out of a principle is common. Its operation may be comparatively silent, and still equally effective. Where true repentance is wanting, there may be a feeling of desolation in the views of sin, and a consciousness of awaiting wrath; but a right understanding of the evil nature of sin itself, and of its extent, cannot exist. In the meanwhile, there is an aversion from our Judge, a repugnance to the plan of his dealing, often in exact proportion to these discoveries. "Where, then, is the fault? Why do not such discoveries lead

to a happy issue?" I answer, because they are partial: and they must ever be so, while repentance is wanting.

This remark brings me to the second cause; or, more properly, to consider the true source of repentance.

In the prophecy which declares the promise of redemption and the remission of sins, it is said, "They shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn."* Here is an emphatic description of the origin and attendant feelings of true repentance. Until the mind is turned away from collateral considerations and reflections of mere selfishness, and becomes in some measure fixed on the great sacrifice for sin, every feeling will continue unavailing and unacceptable to God. But, let us suppose the direction of mind to be right and decided. The sinner looks to that great sacrifice for sin. He beholds the immensity of the offering, and the corresponding infinity of guilt for which it was made. He marks well the love which paid such a price for the redemption of the transgressor. His heart is penetrated with a sense of his past ingratitude. He is astonished, as he traces the previous current of his affections. Every gaze deepens emotions, which produce an effect upon every faculty

* Zech. xii. 10.

of his mind. His understanding embraces momentous truths which had before been far remote. In the eastern imagery, adopted by the penitent Ephraim, he is ready to exclaim, "Surely, after that I was turned I repented; and after that I was instructed, I smote upon my thigh; I was ashamed, yea, even confounded!" In the meantime, an insight into the purity of the divine character puts into his mouth the exclamation of the patriarch, "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth thee; wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes."

One other consideration stands prominently out, and throws its light upon both the past and the present. It is the self-accusing thought, that he whom we have offended, and whose justice might have struck us down, pays the vast demand of that attribute, and bids us repose with confidence in the arms of his love. Here is an appeal to the most powerful sensibilities of the human heart.

I will suppose you to have exercised a series of systematic efforts against the interests of an acquaintance; and that the origin of them all was in the gratification of your own selfishness, with a perfect recklessness of the issue. I will suppose that, after a lapse of time, you have discovered that this acquaintance, though aware of the unkind and unjust part you were acting, was

engaged all that time in endeavouring to promote your welfare, and now, when deserved ruin has followed your perfidious conduct, he has stood between you and destruction. Would you not be confounded by the contrast between your own selfishness and his disinterestedness; his love and your malignity? And would not this be accompanied with an utter detestation of your own conduct? It is sometimes said, that there is a principle within the human breast which indisposes us to love those whom we have wronged; and that, in proportion to the injuries we have inflicted, we kindle an animosity in our own bosoms against their object. For the present admit this. Does not this hatred arise from a belief that a corresponding animosity exists in the bosom of the injured party? A belief that discredits or suspects all manifestations of good-will? And is it not connected with a dread of that humiliating feeling which arises in a proud mind on receiving favours from an enemy? But suppose the criminal, in this case, to be fully convinced that all the good which he had, emanated from pure disinterestedness; and that his benefactor was prepared and able to bury deep in oblivion all that was past (an effect not always easily conceived in human affairs), might we not look for something of a practical and affecting character in the result? Now, the sinner has

been sustained by an almighty arm, through the course of his rebellion; and yet benevolence has followed him on. If he weigh the consequences of his past life with all this in view, he may be agitated in the survey; but the sight of God out of Christ will do more than reduce him to despair. Such is the reigning injustice of his heart, that the very mercies and long suffering of which he has been the subject, will increase his hatred of his Maker, because they aggravate his desert of condemnation. Change, then, the spectacle before him. Let the Saviour appear in his scriptural character; and you can easily conceive how the enlightening of his understanding gives a new aspect to his condition and to every thing around him.

In this view of the subject, there must be an apprehension and comprehension of the Redeemer, or of the divine mercy through him. It is to this end that Jesus Christ is represented as “set forth,” or “exhibited, a propitiation, through faith in his blood.” Faith, then, in the order of its agency, precedes repentance. The latter grace is certainly highly acceptable to God; “but without faith it is impossible to please him.” Now the difference between a false and true faith has a most important reference to the object. The careless sinner will tell us that he believes in Jesus Christ; but he has no defined idea of the

object of true faith, because he has no feeling or personal interest in it: and, therefore, neither this grace, nor any of its effects, can be produced in his heart.

If, then, a right comprehension of Jesus Christ be the true source of repentance, you can judge of the species of sorrow which accompanies it. And, in the converse of this, you will see why legal conviction of sin will be of no avail of itself; since it is transitory in its nature; and since the mental sufferings which it produces so readily end in a deceptive calm, which may be mistaken for the new birth, although it may be the incipient chilling of the second death. It is not repentance, but mere remorse; the remorse of an unbelieving heart.

You will observe, too, that evangelical, or godly sorrow, cannot be a temporary effusion. Its source is far higher than that of any earthly grief. It may not exhibit the same intensity of emotion: but the most durable grief that ever occupies the bosom is, most usually, silent. Its progress, though noiseless, is like the current of deep waters; regular and irresistible. It is, like a living stream, active and effective; not stagnant and still, diffusing around the vapours of death.

Nor is true mourning for sin confined to the neighbourhood of its first appearance. The evangelical penitent exclaims with the psalmist,

“Rivers of waters run down mine eyes, because they keep not thy law.”* The iniquities of others are distressing to a soul which has ever fairly and fully contemplated the cross of Jesus.

All this is the more obvious when you keep in mind that a counterfeit or spurious repentance arises from terror; a passion whose legitimate tendency is to banish love from the bosom, or rather to interdict its entrance there. Previously to the existence of this legal, or rather illegal, conviction, the sinner may have entertained an idea of God more pleasant than otherwise to his carnal mind. But it arose from that conception of the divine mercy, which rather encouraged than depressed his feelings of self-complacency. This being removed, and a more full notion of justice coming into sight, an external obedience commences from a principle of dread. It is the same restraint that is kept on the conduct of the wolf, by the nearness of the shepherd. It is the same obedience which a refractory slave may observe, under fear of his master's lash. Remove the apprehension of personal punishment, and the dominion of sin will be more powerful than ever. It will be found that the momentary check gives strength to desire, and passion unrestricted flows beyond its former bounds. Hence we often find the

The neighbourhood of its first appearance. The evangelical penitent with the psalmist.

* Ps. cxix. 136.

profligacy of those who have been once awakened, more inveterate and determined than before. The sorrow had been, rather that God hated sin so much, than that they had been guilty of it.

On the contrary, true repentance springs from love to God and a corresponding hatred of all that is unlike his holy character. To such a man it is not a subject of sorrow that the law is so holy, and its penalty so severe. He laments that his nature has been in opposition to the sacred requirements, and that his inherent carnality is so much at variance with his spiritual desires.

In the first case, aversion was created by the very effort to obey; and the distance between God and himself was accordingly widened. In the second, obedience is a means of keeping the affections nearer their object.

Spurious repentance produces an imperfect effect upon the life. This is obvious from its very nature. As it does not arise from a just discovery of the evil of sin, and is not connected with an abhorrence of it, whatever change may be produced is partial. It is true, that the subject may make certain sacrifices, in the omission of certain practices, or in the discharge of certain outward duties: but without jealousy of self, which arises from an insight into his own heart; without that law of love, which turns inclination to obedience, and cordially delights in the divine commands;

it is impossible that the reformation of life should be sincere or complete. If such a man do not content himself with obedience to certain requirements, which demand little self-denial, and consider this sufficient to cover his neglect of those which call for a greater sacrifice : or if he do not play some other and equally compromising part ; if he do not commit certain evils, he will omit certain duties ; if he be restrained from open transgression ; still he will cherish iniquities of the heart. The actings of his mind do not come under his careful inspection. There is a light rein to the workings of a depraved fancy. There is no critical scrutiny of his motives. There is no inquiry into the tenor of his desires. The want of substantial principle excludes all possibility of regular and permanent benefit. Even the external appearance of good may be temporary, irregular, and subject to something like caprice. But it is the opposite of all this, which takes place in a mind renewed unto genuine repentance towards God.

In the first of these cases, there is no ground of humility ; because there is no self-loathing, no distressing sensation of the power of indwelling depravity. The failure, therefore, of an attempt to remove any evil is not a matter of great uneasiness : because, while it can be attributed to natural infirmity, the self-flatterer is satisfied in

casting all the blame there, and he acquires a feeling of self-complacency in doing so. To him this presents no additional reason for hating the dominion of sin.

The true penitent, on the contrary, exclaims on every such discovery, "O, wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" While he sinks into the dust of self-abasement; and wonders at the extent of that grace which can pardon guilt of so deep a die. His faith and repentance, and this knowledge of himself, constitute the true foundation of humility. Charity for the faults of others, and a love for those who bear the image of God, are inseparable accompaniments. So true is it, that where one genuine grace exists, the rest of the train will likewise be.

I need not trespass further on your time by describing the fruits of repentance, as they are commonly called, in the life of the penitent. The apostle Paul seems to have summed up all these in a short sentence, addressed to the church of Corinth: "For behold this self same thing, that ye sorrowed after a godly sort; what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge!"*

* 2 Cor. vii. 11.

You see, then, that he who properly inquires into the meaning and character of true repentance, must look for the evidence of a change of heart, and not for any self-created goodness which he is to find previously to his approach to God.*

Adieu, dear sir, may it be yours to “look unto Him,” who, in dying for our transgressions, made more manifest our guilt, while he displayed the surpassing fulness of his mercy.

Very truly yours.

* On this momentous subject, the inquirer will eminently consult his spiritual benefit, by a careful perusal of many among the admirable fragments of the late Dr. Ryland, published since his death, under the title of “*Pastoral Memorials* ;” but, especially, the “*Supposed Dialogue between Nathan the Prophet, and Absalom* ;” the “*Queries respecting Sin and Duty* ;” the “*Remarks on Dr. Chalmers’s Sermons* ;” and the Essay “*On the Power of Sinners to repent* :” in vol. ii. p. 316—333. *Ed.*

LETTER XIII.

An Inquirer reviewing his past distress.—A remarkable period, and an eventful pause.—The simplicity of faith.—A temptation to hold back from Christ.—Natural incredulousness.—The afflicted father's application to Christ.—The case applied to the Inquirer.—The workings of his mind.—The humble resignation of his soul to Christ.—Characters of the great change now rendered perceptible.—Differences in mode and order.—The act in which relief is most commonly obtained.—Not always the same.—Yet always coincident in one grand principle.

MY DEAR SIR,

To him who entertains a hope that he has found the great object of his search, a review of his past solicitude, and of the fluctuations of his doubts and fears (comprising, as they do, a painful history), will end in astonishment at his own perverseness. This may not be equally the case with all persons. But few are they who will not discover, that much of their time has been expended in the removal of misconceptions, in correcting errors, in vainly looking and trying to discover new rules of proceeding, in attempting to pry into the secret purposes of God, or to render more complete the Saviour's work, in barren

reveries with regard to their future course, or in endeavouring to form and cultivate an unholy patience under the guise of waiting for the gift of faith. The retrospect of past life, in its ordinary details, presents, to most of us, a melancholy group of circumstances. But a review of the season of conviction of sin and the application for mercy, usually revives feelings of peculiar distress. We are astonished at our great ignorance and infatuation, with respect to things which now appear so perfectly plain. Above all, we wonder at our rejection of knowledge, or our misapplication of it; and at our efforts to render that intricate and complex, which was distinguished by its simplicity. Now, for the first time, we understand the spirit of the Syrian general's reply to the prophet: "Are not Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel?" and the force of his servant's answer, "My father, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldst thou not have done it? How much rather then, when he saith to thee, Wash and be clean?"

But there may have been a prior point in our history in which we could discern the relinquishment—the reluctant relinquishment—of one false resting place after another, till we could not distinguish a single remaining impediment: and yet nothing remained of a character sufficiently

distinctive to furnish repose to a wearied and disconsolate mind. The past was a painful survey: the future a dreary blank;

“Poor child of doubt and death, whose hope was built on reeds!”

This state appears a pause in the moral career of the soul: an eventful silence, in which the exhausted passions seek respite, and the flagging spirits, wearied by excitement, sink into the languor of despondency. Or, if no such marked effect succeed the disappointing restlessness of the Inquirer, when he has at last seen all his palliatives and resources exploded, and all the hinderances to his salvation resolved into his own fault; most usually there still remains a momentary calm, broken by a voice which announces the presence of the very boon that is sought—“I WOULD BELIEVE!” Faith, that wonderful and mysterious principle, upon which so many surmises had existed, and which had appeared so indefinible, begins, perhaps unsuspected, its operations in the mind. The Inquirer ascertains, that the difficulty of explaining the meaning of the term arose from its very simplicity. He is now astonished to find in himself the partial exercise of a grace, relative to which he had so much perplexed his own mind; and he now easily sees how it is, that many of the illiterate and ignorant, who have not lingered on the way in pursuit of

explications and distinctions, more readily lay hold of the hope of salvation, than some whose knowledge is greater, and whose understandings have been better enlightened. On the one hand, he sees the hopelessness of his condition, as it is by nature; and, on the other, the suitableness of the divine promises to all the circumstances of his case. Such a comparison as this fits his mind for the exercise of true belief. The particular character of his present state assists him in interpreting the gospel plan of salvation, while he beholds its admirable adaptation to his own wants; and in return, an examination into this plan, briefly and imperfectly as it may be done, corrects and illustrates his conceptions of his own condition. He may be hardly sensible of the process of such a comparison, nor would it probably occur to him, that the degree of his faith will be according to the extent of his perception of the truth; and that faith itself does not always correspond with the extrinsic evidence of the truth, but rather depends on the manner in which that truth actually influences the mind. In a crisis which has aroused into sensibility every feeling of his heart, and has quickened into action every faculty of his mind, he has neither the power nor the inclination, to watch, with a cold philosophizing speculation, the process by which the Holy Spirit commences the work of grace. It is enough that

the wretchedness of his natural state is completely demonstrated, and that the blessings tendered by the Lord Jesus Christ are exactly and perfectly suited to his deepest sense of need.

He now finds confidence to cast the weight of his cares and all the mighty interests of his soul, upon the divine Redeemer ; and to say, with the Christian poet,

“ A guilty, weak, and helpless worm,
On thy kind arms I fall ;
Be thou my strength and righteousness,
My Jesus, and my all !”

Yet, the Inquirer may be tempted to hold back from a full confidence in Christ, in consequence of some idea of the glory of the object sought, viewed in contrast with his own unworthiness. And another case, much resembling this, is not uncommon. The awakened sinner, who has seen the obstructions to his faith vanishing one by one, and who has a partial glimpse of the excellency of divine grace, may be induced, as it were, to shrink back from it, by that wayward infidelity which is the temperament of some minds, on the first disclosure of happy intelligence. I have somewhere said, that you must have observed the remarkable diversity of effects produced by the same intelligence, on different mental characters. One drinks in the information with eagerness and implicit credulity : another avows his doubts at

once, for no other reason than that the news is too good to be true. It may be thus with the religious Inquirer. He cannot believe; not because his sins are too great to be pardoned; for he may not doubt the sufficiency of the atonement; and he may see that honour would accrue to the Redeemer from the recovery of the vilest sinner; but he cannot lay hold of a truth, whose personal application to himself is to produce so amazing an alteration in his present and eternal condition. Indeed the same feeling may, sometimes, and to a great extent, exist in the mind of an established Christian. There may be a time, when his views of the glory of the redeemed, and of the value of redemption, so far overwhelm him with a sense of their grandeur and excellence, as to institute a doubt whether, of such blessedness, *he can* be a partaker. The happy lot of others he does not question; but he cannot admit his own.

The fault here arises from an imperfect view of the subject. He distinguishes one part of it, but attends too little to another. The provisions of the gospel are discerned; but their exact fitness to his own case is overlooked. The possibility of mercy is acknowledged; but its appropriateness to a state obviously his own, is not recollected, or is, in some other way, not justly perceived. Here, and in any other instance in which the character

and the design of redemption are partially apprehended, there is a strong temptation to an unreasonable incredulousness. When the Inquirer stands aloof from the offer of grace, and exclaims, "The gift seems too great for me, I cannot believe that so much favour can be mine:" it is manifest that his comprehension of the great subject is essentially imperfect.

There may also be another reason for such an expression. There is a self-deception, of which the undisciplined mind is not aware. Professing a solemn renunciation of all self-righteousness, the Inquirer may yet be nurturing a false humility; which he secretly deems acceptable to God, and for which he expects a proportionate reward. He forgets that it is dishonourable to his Maker to discredit the offers on which the divine veracity is staked; and that the very diffidence which he embraces as a virtue, is a real challenging of Jehovah's veracity.

I have sometimes watched the progressive workings of a mind, which dealt more uprightly with itself, whose changes were almost visible, and which, after all its false reasonings, had seen the necessity and duty of an immediate and implicit reliance on the word and the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ: and I have thought of the resemblance of such a case to that of the petitioner who

said, "I believe; help my unbelief."* The afflicted man had said, "If thou canst do any thing."—The Saviour replies, "If thou canst believe:—all things are possible to him that believeth." In other words, the hinderance consisted in the weakness of faith on the part of the applicant, and not in the difficulty of the case itself. Of this distinction we are too apt to lose sight. The anxious parent receives the reproof, and acknowledges its justice; while, at the same time, he lays hold of the encouragement which the Saviour's language was designed to convey, and exclaims, "I believe!" Here was still an imperfection on the part of the applicant. He admitted that Christ was the Son of God, and his last hope; while yet the inveteracy of his child's disease staggered his confidence in even miraculous power. Of this inconsistency he appears to have been in some degree sensible: and, with the emotion of a bosom, in which hope and fear were severely struggling, he asks assistance to his wavering mind: and he asks it with tears. The very act of his prayer evinced some confidence in the Son of God, while it disclosed the feeling of temptation to distrust. Acceptable prayer implies real faith, though it may be weak,

* Mark ix. 23, 24.

and though the object sought by that prayer be faith itself. In this instance, the applicant indicates a sincere belief in the power and sufficiency of Christ, while he implores assistance against his unbelief. He did what the disciples had done before him, when they said, "Lord, increase our faith!"

It is thus that the awakened sinner, in sight of his lost condition, in view of the sufficiency of Jesus Christ, and with the conviction of his own natural infidelity, cries, "Help my unbelief!" This is the cry of a burdened soul, attempting to rest the weight of its cares on the Saviour, seeking assistance to do so, and complaining of that hardness of heart which weakens confidence. The light of heaven, now poured into the mind, discovers more fully the depravity which it laments; while it reveals, so much more extensively, the inducements to an unconditional surrender of all its affections. There is, probably, not a single prayer adopted by successful Inquirers more general than this; nor one, if this arise from the heart, which is more frequently the immediate precursor of satisfactory evidence that the all-important change has been wrought. I have often thought the whole narration to be one of the most applicable to the present subject.

Were I to attempt describing the workings of the Inquirer's mind, when near to this happy

issue, I should certainly derive that description from the discoveries which he now makes of the Redeemer's character. He sees God, as manifested in his Son; justice, as satisfied by the Saviour's death; mercy, as revealed through him. He reflects on the world, to form the best estimate of it, by contemplating Him who knew not where to lay his head; on death, to behold in Christ the resurrection and the life: on the judgment, to see the victim of Calvary occupying the throne. Nor is there any thing connected with the divine plan of government; nor any thing with which the Christian has to do in the concerns of eternity; in which the person and character of Jesus Christ do not hold THE PROMINENT PLACE. All—every thing is resolved into matters belonging to the offices of the gracious Redeemer. How effectually do such meditations become the means of fastening the attention on the Mediator and Advocate of sinners; and of imparting, perhaps insensibly, a lively faith in his name! How difficulties vanish in such an engagement, and how freely the sinner exclaims, in the first act of belief,

“Jesus, I give myself away,

’Tis all that I can do!”

Happy moment! when a sense of ill-desert, of confidence in Christ, and grateful love, meet and blend together!

I am not sure that the particular manner, or the specific feelings, with which the Inquirer first lays hold of the hope of salvation, differing as they do in different persons, deserve much of your consideration. Yet it may not be amiss to say a few words on this subject.

In some minds there is a rapid, or even a sudden, transition, from a painful state of moral darkness, to a condition of light and comfort. During the act of prayer, or in some moment of meditation, the oppressive weight which had rested on the heart of the Inquirer, leaves him. His views of sovereign mercy are distinct and clear. A spirit of humble confidence takes possession of his bosom. His feelings draw him to the contemplation of the riches of grace. Hope flings its bright rays around him. Every thing appears changed. Every thing is new. A smile of heavenly cheerfulness plays on the very works of nature. A reconciled God shines in them all. And the gloom, which had so recently lowered over every object that met the eye, has passed away, like the morning cloud. The Inquirer is astonished at himself; astonished at a transition so utterly unaccountable and unexpected. Whence this wonderful alteration in external things? The change is in his own mind, and not in them. Whence this disposition to a full confidence in his Saviour, so different from his late waverings and

fears? He cannot himself comprehend it; nor can he retrace a single step to it. He can only say, like him restored of old, "Whereas I was blind, now I see!"

O, how different is all this, from his former fanciful expectations! How unlike all that imagination had figured! And how may it remind him of that memorable prophecy of the Saviour's power, "I will bring the blind by a way that they knew not; I will lead them in paths that they have not known; I will make darkness light before them, and crooked things straight."*

Wonderful, transforming influence! Mysterious and silent agency! And the subject of this astonishing change half questions a reality which his sober judgment, on every appeal, confirms. He inquires of his own heart, "Is it that I have lost sight of my sinfulness; or is it that my forgetfulness of guilt has produced this peace, from the contrast with its painful remembrance? No. My depravity never assumed a form so horrible before; sin was never so loathsome, and purity never so lovely. I look back, to see the narrow plank over which I have passed, and I shudder at the yawning abyss below it. The moral atmosphere I now breathe gives vigour to my exhausted spirit. My desires expand. My appe-

* Is. xlii. 16.

tite craves a new sustenance for the soul. Tell me, is not this of God?"

Memorable epoch! Memorable through eternity. It is the commencement of life. All before it was the spectacle of putrefaction and death.

But, in the experience of others, the moment, the hour, or the day, is far less marked. A more common case, perhaps, is that in which the light breaks on the understanding, like the gradual approach of the morning dawn. It was the prayer of the prostrate soul,

"Come, then, thou Crucified, my mourning thoughts

O sanctify! Reveal thy bleeding form

To me, miserable. O impart

Thy mercy, while I seek—

Thy presence. Lo! I come all penitent,

Bowing to earth oppressed" —

And the petition flows with an earnestness and fervour hitherto unknown. No divine influence is imagined: and yet the petitioner is surprised at a new intensity of feeling; a freedom of utterance; a sweet and lovely calm, well marked in opposition to the experience of hours gone by. Still the mist is not completely scattered. The sensible alteration that exists, is not sufficient to create a holy joy. Assurance is wanting; desire is more importunate; and, in the sense of partial discovery, the Inquirer exclaims, like the blind man of Bethsaida, "I see men, as trees, walk-

ing.”* It may be, that another, or even a still further, accession of light, will be necessary, to unfold clearly the object of a holy confidence. The steady progress of the understanding and affections, and the effects successively produced, give, in turn, additional reasons for a complete trust in the promise of salvation. Reflection, observation, and comparison, confirm that trust: and the recovered soul advances, with certain pace, to the enjoyment of heavenly peace.

But, that “he went on his way rejoicing,” is not to be said of all. There are those who, from reasons already assigned, never participate in the more elevated enjoyments which belong to the experience of others. A physical constitution naturally cold, or perverted or defective views of evangelical doctrine in some particulars, may keep the mind under an unscriptural and injurious habit of suspense, even through the remainder of life. But still the subject of our remarks has just reason to recognize a change within himself, which is really, if not obviously, from on high. The charms of the world have faded away: their insufficiency and vanity are conspicuous to his sight. Sin assumes a greater and greater aspect of disgust. The value of the soul, and the mercies of Christ, are more distinctly discerned. If

* Mark viii. 24.

there be not the desired ardour in his devotions, it is not because his heart is elsewhere, for these furnish his dearest hours. If he cannot “tune the enraptured lay,” and soar with a lighter and a freer spirit, there is a healthful regularity in the movements of the soul. If the language of some of the songs of Zion be sometimes too high strung for the measure of his feelings, those feelings accord with its spirit still. He loves to contemplate what the redeemed admire, while he laments the oppressive weight that restrains his flight. The world shall behold him the **CONSISTENT CHRISTIAN**: and his pursuits, in their seriousness and steadiness, shall tell the direction of his prevailing taste and desires. He recognizes a sustaining hand, that upholds him in his ways: though his faith may not furnish a cup overflowing with positive delight.

There are also other gradations of feeling, different from these, arising from the character of the mind, the circumstances under which it acts, or some graciously adapted peculiarity in the manner of the divine influence. Yet all these variations are of secondary importance. It is enough that the heart is transferred from the world to God; that its affections have a new home. The *degree* of spiritual enjoyment is not the primary test of a renewed soul; and the mea-

suring of its increase is far from being a profitable employment.

Nor can the act, or mode of thought, by which consolation first comes to the mind, be distinguished as precisely similar in all cases! A passage of scripture is frequently the instrument of dispersing the gloom, and opening an avenue to hope. Yet that passage may have come unsought, and at a time when the thoughts were taking a different direction. Or, when despair has completely overwhelmed the soul, an unexpected relief may reach the sufferer, even without distinguishable means, at the very moment in which a sense of his helplessness is most distressing.

I am confident that most Christians, who can point out the first day of relief (for all are by no means able to do so), date that event from an act of prayer, or pondering the divine word. But the great New-Creator of hearts sometimes uses instruments which seem to have no connexion with so important an end. An exemplary Christian, "whose praise is in all the churches," owed his first sense of a change to an ordinary incident of life. His child was reading aloud a portion of Grecian history. The father had been absorbed in a melancholy review of his past life, and in a kind of vacant gaze on the dreariness of his present prospect; when his

attention was awakened by the following anecdote:

Alexander the Great had promised a courtier, who had rendered him some signal service, whatever reward he might ask. On the credit of this promise, the favourite drew an exorbitant order upon the royal treasury. The treasurer, astonished, took the order to his master. Alexander looked at it for a moment, and then said to the officer, "This proves how generously my friend thinks of my love: he proportions his demand to his trust in my affection: pay the amount." The train of reflections which now arose in the mind of the parent, began a new era in his life. "Have I," thought he, "been soliciting the Friend of sinners, with a cherished doubt of his willingness to do all that he offers? Have I intimated a discredit of *his* truth, who gave his life a ransom for the miserable? I WILL BELIEVE: and his own goodness shall interpret my confidence."

There may seem little connexion between the story and the results to which it led. But it is impossible to tell the associations to which any incident may carry us; or to augur those unaccountable evolutions of thought to which we are all accustomed. And we know how readily the mind brings, and appropriates to its favourite pursuit, all that passes before it.

And now, dear sir, farewell! I take leave of

this subject, after placing these hints in your hands, with an humble hope that the Great Hearer of prayer may sanctify my feeble efforts to relieve your anxiety: and with some confidence in commending you to Him who can say to your soul, with the same power with which he spake in the beginning of creation, "LET THERE BE LIGHT!"

Very truly yours,

T. C. HENRY.

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Henry, Thomas C.

Letters to a friend intended to relieve the difficulties of an anxious
inquirer under serious impressions on the subject of conversion and
salvation

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